



A Yuletide Dream

Julie Cooper



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To Jay, Emma, Gracie and Teddy, my very best gifts

Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

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About the Author

Also by Julie Cooper



“My troublous dreams this night doth make me sad.”

King Lear, Henry VI Part II

December 19, 1811

To begin with, it was Sir William Lucas to whom Darcy owed his first of many unwelcome discoveries. Bingley, with typical recklessness, had incited a general expectation of *marriage* by his prolific attentions towards Miss Bennet of Longbourn. Truthfully, and until Sir William’s displeasing disclosures, Darcy had hardly noticed Bingley’s partiality. He had been too obsessed with his mighty attempts to disregard the pull and provocations of the

pretty, perceptive next-eldest Bennet sister.

Darcy's wrestle had been caused by his second unpleasant discovery: an interest, then an admiration, and, finally, an...was *adoration* too strong a word? When he rose from his bed eagerly, because the day's interactions might include her? When he took an excessive interest in her concerns? When he felt humiliated, for her sake, as her cousin, her younger sisters, her mother, even her father at times exposed themselves with ridiculous and intemperate behaviour?

No. Adoration was too mild, affection too trifling. He had watched her only this evening at Lucas Lodge, at yet another Christmas festivity he had not wished to attend, listening as she baited Miss Bingley in a teasing so subtle, her victim had no idea when she stepped into the trap of foolish declaration. Kindly, however, Miss Elizabeth had not enlightened her; only the sparkle in her eyes bespoke her amusement, allowing her opponent to retain all her coveted self-importance.

His mortification was complete: he was in love.

He could only imagine the responses of his relations if he attempted to explain his preference for her above all others. '*Who is her mother? Who are her uncles and aunts? What is her fortune?*' They would not long remain ignorant of the Bennets' condition in life. Their expectations would be disappointed—and while he never had any intention of marrying Anne de Bourgh, he had at least hoped that her mother should not be able to say a word of objection when he presented his bride—because said bride was to be the epitome of beauty, birth, and fortune. His pride demanded it.

Leave here! he lectured himself. *Leave before the countryside begins speaking of you and her with the same certainty as Bingley and Miss Bennet!* Had he not singled out Miss Elizabeth with his attentions more than once? Was it not becoming more and more difficult to pretend an indifference he did not feel? Why had he remained in this dull village, on the thin excuse of determining whether or not Miss Jane Bennet actually *cared* for his friend? What would it matter if she did? Regardless, the moment he had been certain Miss Bennet's affections were *not* engaged, he ought to have fled, taking Bingley with him.

His ruminations were suddenly interrupted by the arrival of the last person he ever expected to meet in Netherfield's library: Miss Bingley. She did not admire books, only that he owned so many of

them. He stood at once, giving her a brief bow, then raised one brow in enquiry.

"I apologise for disturbing you," she said rather breathlessly. But then, she could not possibly be in the habit of intruding, alone, upon gentlemen in their private recesses, and was doubtless embarrassed. "I determined that I must speak to you at the earliest opportunity—regarding my brother."

"Your brother?" he asked, though he could almost guess what she would next say.

"Yes. As much as it grieves me to admit, I fear he believes himself in love with the sly and shrewd Miss Jane Bennet. It defies all rational thinking, but you know how easily his affections are bestowed. When do you leave to join Miss Darcy in London?"

Yet another imprudence on his part. Georgiana had begged him to come home to Pemberley for Christmas; instead, he had convinced *her* to journey to London, where he intended to meet her. She had departed for town only today, so would not arrive there until the twenty-third of December. All so that he could remain where he was for a few days longer.

He had indulged his fascination with Miss Elizabeth by attending one entertainment after another in this country village, all of them inferior to London's prospects, and only worth the while for those brief moments when he could watch for her, listen to her, be near her. He ought to have left yesterday. Or last week. He ought never to have come at all.

"Tomorrow, most likely," he made himself say.

"Oh, Mr Darcy, will you not convince my brother that we *all* must go? Surely, once we are in town, with its attendant delights, he will forget this foolish infatuation! As his friend, I beg you to save him from himself! I do not think I exaggerate the danger."

No, she did not, and Bingley was not its only casualty. "I will speak to him, and will do my best to encourage his departure. Once we are in London, common sense must surely prevail."

Once away in London, Darcy mused, a gentleman's imagined love must rapidly jump to distant admiration; the leap from admiration to apathy ought to require but a moment. Oughtn't it?



* * *

It was a simple matter to convince Bingley to spend Christmas in London. All Darcy had to do was to say that he truly wished for him to go—Bingley was always accommodating. He pretended not to notice his friend's backward glances as the carriage wheeled away. Determinedly, he made none of his own. Between him and Miss Bingley, they could help Bingley see the impossibility—the grave error—of ever returning to this place.

He *ought* to have felt relief. He *should* have been thankful for the quick escape. Instead, as they reached the familiar bustle and noise of London, he felt nothing but the heavy weight of gloom. Nevertheless, he manfully stayed his course. Once all were settled, he invited Bingley for a private conversation in his study. There, he explained all he had observed of Miss Bennet—that her open, cheerful manners were as pleasant towards Bingley as they were towards Sir William Lucas. However, there were no sidelong glances or longing stares. She was a woman being pressured by her mother to net herself a husband, so of course she would never discourage him—but *his* feelings were one-sided. Darcy's explanations continued as the light in Bingley's eyes dimmed and all joy fled.

It was a necessary evil! he told himself. *As his friend, I could do no less!* But the weight of the dreadful duty continued to plague him long after Bingley took himself off to his brother Hurst's London abode.

Darcy's third disagreeable discovery came at Georgiana's arrival in London. His sister had always been quiet and shy. Now, however, she was almost silent. She stared at her feet or her hands in her lap rather than meeting his eye. She could not be drawn out. He spoke with her companion, who was departing for a brief holiday to visit relations; Mrs Annesley assured him it was a temporary condition she would soon outgrow. *He* remained uncertain, feeling all the helplessness of the situation—and a good deal of annoyance at

himself for allowing the companion to leave her charge at such a delicate time.

Diffident, sweet Georgiana had lost all her confidence. Once more, George Wickham had taken something precious and left only ruins behind.



“To die, to sleep—to sleep perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub, for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause.”

Hamlet, Hamlet Act 3

December 23, 1811

Darcy sat in his London home’s music room while his sister played the Christmas melodies he had suggested. Georgiana was remarkably talented, but in those notes he could hear her sorrow; she played *The Coventry Carol* as if it were a dirge.

Morton tapped upon the door, and the music ceased abruptly

with his entrance.

“An express for you, sir.”

He took the missive from his butler, brow furrowed. It was from his uncle, Earl of Matlock. Breaking the seal, he read it. And gaped at the contents.

“Brother? Is anything the matter? You look pale.”

He glanced up from the writing on the page. “It is Lady Catherine.” He swallowed. “She is dead. An apoplexy.”

“Dead? It seems quite impossible.”

It was not, perhaps, a usual response to the death of a near relation, but Darcy understood his sister’s meaning. While neither of them was, nor could be, consumed by grief at the news, Lady Catherine de Bourgh had seemed an indomitable, immovable fixture in both their lives. For all the times she had driven him mad with the frustration of her constant urgings in her daughter Anne’s direction—no matter how often he informed his aunt, in no uncertain terms, that the match was impossible—he *had* cared for her; he visited her regularly, endured her self-importance and endless fascination with minutiae. In looks, she was very like his mother, even if not quite so pretty or refined. It was a great shock.

“What of Anne?” his sister asked, and he sighed. Anne was doubtless devastated by this loss.

“She will go to Matlock for the nonce, our uncle says. He would like me to overlook Rosings Park and settle affairs there.”

It was not all his uncle had said.

You ought to think carefully on this, Darcy. Rosings Park and all it encompasses could be yours. Of course, I would like Anne for Richard, but the girl prefers you, and her wishes ought to be considered.

The thought of marrying Anne had never been a tempting one. But how much of his distaste had been the notion of dancing constant attendance on Anne’s difficult mother? Anne was sickly and cross, but she was also retiring and uncomplicated. She got on well enough with his sister; Georgiana would have no issue with a closer connexion. And then there was the estate.

Darcy had always taken a deep interest in Rosings Park. It was vast, full of undeveloped potential, and his aunt had resisted nearly all of his best suggestions for improving it. The earl was warning him as plainly as he could—*act now, or the estate will go to Richard.*

“Ought we to put out the black crape?” Georgiana asked, interrupting his musings.

Would Darcy House go into full mourning, with a hatchment and black ribbon on the door? No. No, they would not. His aunt had died in Kent, not London, and Georgiana was sombre enough without decking her in black and grey. Lady Matlock might express a different opinion, but for now he would avoid too dismal a display.

“Black gloves only, I think. And of course, I shall not go out so much.” It was wrong, undoubtedly, that he was pleased to have an excuse to avoid the flood of invitations that would surely arrive, once it was known he was in town.

His sister nodded, then begged to be excused on the pretext of writing to her cousin.



* * *

For the rest of the day, a deluge of rain kept callers at bay. Darcy locked himself in his study, ostensibly to ponder the needs of Rosings, but really to consider what he ought to do with his future. What, truly, was best?

The thought of being husband to Anne was revolting. But could he force his feelings to change? His own parents' marriage—which he believed to have been a happy one—was arranged by their respective families to enhance the wealth and prestige of their respective houses. He had been taught, almost from his cradle, to fulfil his duties to both his antecedents and his progeny. It was why he could not allow himself to consider Elizabeth.

Elizabeth. He had endeavoured to disregard her, to forget her vivacity, her wit, her fine character—developed, somehow, despite the ridiculous creatures surrounding her. He tried not to consider how wonderful a sister she would be for Georgiana, how her *joie de vivre* would encourage the too-solemn younger lady. He sought to forget the fine, perfectly respectable birth of her father, in favour of remembering who would inherit her family properties upon that father's death. He struggled against the dreams haunting him each

night—the dream of Elizabeth waltzing in his arms; the dream of seeing Elizabeth by moonlight; the dream of kissing her—*No!* He flung himself away from his desk, the papers he was supposedly examining drifting haphazardly to the floor.

There was so little acceptable to remember! Should he foster a family connexion to William Collins, the obsequious and ridiculous vicar who had held the living for Lady Catherine? Should he expose dear Georgiana to the other more coquettish and less well-mannered daughters of Mr Bennet? Should the Darcy heir go visiting to Elizabeth's relations in *Cheapside*? He shuddered to think of it. It was not to be borne.

All told, it was a long and depressing day, followed by a nearly silent dinner.

At least the rain kept the carollers away.



“Why, thou hast put him in such a dream, that when the image of it leaves him, he must run mad.”

Sir Toby Belch, Twelfth Night, Act 2

December 23, 1811 (continued)

Darcy lay in his bed, staring up at the canopy. He was warm, well-fed, comfortable, and tired. So why would sleep not come? He had decided to—nay, *commanded*—himself that he put aside all thoughts of the future. He had brought out, from his vault, his mother’s pearl necklace and bracelet set to be presented to Georgiana on Christmas Day, spending time over a little note expressing his hope that she

would one day grow to be such a woman as their mother had been.

And then he lay still, willing a restful sleep to finally carry him into oblivion.

However, what happened next was neither restful nor slumberous. Rather, there came the sound of...of wood or stone scraping, metals clanking, followed by the discordant notes of a pianoforte. He shot bolt upright in bed, and the noise stopped. By the light of the fire, he peered carefully around him, wary and alert. He did not think he had imagined the sounds; he was quite certain he had been the furthest thing from dozing. But perhaps it was a noise from another part of the house—an intruder? He swung his legs over the side of the mattress, preparing to rise and light a candle, that he might investigate.

A sudden clattering at his chamber door arrested his attention. It was the sound of...dishes rattling? Grunting? The hairs at his nape prickled. The door, of its own volition, opened. He grabbed the heavy candlestick at his bedside, prepared to wield it as a weapon.

But there, unmistakably standing in the doorway in the glow of what *must* have been candlelight, though he could not see any candle, was the last person in the world he might have expected—Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

“Aunt?” he said tentatively. “There—there...has been some mistake. I—I heard you were dead. I am so—”

“There *has* been a mistake,” she announced regally. “Grave, momentous errors have been perpetrated. I am here to see that they are corrected.” With that, and much to his continued astonishment, she pushed her way into his bedchamber, dragging behind her what looked to be the chimney-piece from Rosings’ finest drawing room. How it fit through his door, he could not have said. Grabbing the banyan hanging on the hook near his bed, he shrugged it on, even as he chided himself that he was, plainly, in the throes of a vivid dream and need only await his own awakening.

“As you are aware, it was the favourite wish of both your mother and myself that you marry Anne. From your infancy, we have made your destiny known. You, Fitzwilliam, were formed for my daugh—” She broke off mid-word, swivelling her head to look behind her at something—or *someone?*—he could neither see nor hear.

“I am making my point!” she disputed, with some irritation, to whomever—or *whatever*—she spoke. She turned back to him, taking

a few steps closer. Or rather, she attempted to. Along with the chimney-piece, she appeared to be dragging a pianoforte, a set of elbow chairs, stacks of Sèvres porcelain, an ornately ostentatious jewel cabinet, and a massive, hideously gilded chamber pot. How she moved at all, he could not say, but she finally managed to wedge her way farther into his room.

“As I was saying,” she began, but he could not keep from interrupting.

“Forgive me, my lady, but why are you chained to your furnishings?”

She rolled her eyes. “There are, evidently, *rules*—which *somebody* might have *bothered* to explain *earlier*,” she said, with a quick glare directed towards the invisible personage behind her, “which dictate certain advantages or disadvantages in the world to come, of which I was *wholly* unaware—”

Again, she appeared to be receiving interruptions and reprimands from beyond, then impatiently turned back to him. “Yes, yes, endless sermons of ‘where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,’ and who takes these ideas *literally*, I ask you?”

“Do you mean Holy Scripture?” Darcy queried, incredulous, but noting that, however ridiculous this dream, his aunt remained very true to character. There must be a means of awakening himself, and it was surely past time to do so. But first, he simply *had* to ask the most perplexing question of the many occurring to him.

“But why the marble chimney-piece?”

“Because it *weighs* eight hundred pounds,” she replied with a disdainful sniff. She glanced again over her shoulder. “And *somebody* possesses a very *warped* sense of justice.”

“Perhaps you ought to say what you were, um, sent here to say,” Darcy said, pinching himself without any successful disappearance of this strange dream-incarnation of his aunt.

“Not so hasty! I will not be interrupted. Hear me in silence. You have been considering marriage, but your obligations to your family and your name—some of them imposed by me—have prevented you. Is this not true?”

“Marriage! This is fantastic! Who told you this?” Darcy sputtered.

Something in his aunt’s expression turned sly. “Would you admit, then, that I have *never* discouraged you from following your noblest inclinations, your finest feelings, your...heart, so to speak?”

This, Darcy thought, is too much of a stretch, even for a dream. And since it *must* be merely his imagination gone awry, for once he would speak honestly to her. “Oh, so you have developed a sudden interest in my heart? Perhaps death has truly altered your opinions, my lady. What difference did my *heart* make when you beseeched, browbeat, and badgered Anne to consider me as her betrothed, telling the same to all your acquaintance, exposing me to the censure of the world for caprice and instability and her to its derision for disappointed hopes? Where was your sympathy then?”

“Pardon me for having the best interests of my daughter in mind! Do not pretend she has nothing to offer you.” Again, she turned to look behind her as if listening. She cleared her throat. “Nevertheless. Your happiness is important...exceedingly important. More important than earthly treasures.”

“It is?” Darcy could not help but ask. “More important than descendants and deportment, riches and relations?”

She hesitated. “You would not, of course, wish to bring any discredit upon your young sister.”

No; no, of course I would not. Would disgrace be the end result of such an alliance, however? For the first time, he seriously considered the question, as he had never before allowed himself to even *think* it, and spoke aloud at least one of his conclusions. “But in marrying Elizabeth Bennet, I would surely gain access to such extraordinary resources of happiness as must truly help Georgiana find hers as well.”

Lady Catherine began speaking rapidly. “To be divided by the upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connexions, or fortune is not to be borne. Honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid you from quitting your native sphere and entering into an engagement, ruining your destiny and Anne’s—”

Her voice cut off abruptly, her lips still moving, but no words emerging. Darcy could have sworn he heard a heavy sigh. Without warning, the entire apparition disappeared.

For some time, he only stood where he was, bewildered. *I must be asleep, yet I cannot waken. What should one do when a dream behaves in such an irrational manner? I have always been temperate. Could I have hit my head somehow?*

He pinched himself again, wincing at the pain, but nothing changed. “Never mind it,” he said aloud. *I am only dreaming that I am pinching myself. In the way of ridiculous dreams, this one is a*

reminder from my rational brain of those truths I could not perceive while awake. I cannot love Anne de Bourgh, but what is love? Can it be love if I disappoint all the expectations of my entire family? Marrying to please myself without consideration of my bride's family and fortune would brand me a selfish and even foolish being to future generations of Darcys. I shall forget such reckless and imprudent inclinations as love, return to my bed, and dream myself back into a more peaceful slumber.

With that, he sat back upon his mattress...but he did not remove his banyan or take up his coverlet. Instead, he rested against his pillows and thought with some incredulity upon the vision, doing his best to convince himself that it was all nonsense and to quash the wellspring of hope that consideration of such a future had wrought within his breast.

After several minutes of self-lecturing, he felt his tension easing. It was just and understandable that he was feeling unsettled, and wild dreams were a usual outcome of such shocking news as the death of Lady Catherine, of his worries for Bingley and for Georgiana, even of the distress of fleeing Hertfordshire under a cloud of almost-disgrace. He was an eminently practical man, just as practical as his aunt was silly. He had been plagued by guilt all day long, for neglecting to act in the way Lady Catherine and his parents would have wished in offering for his cousin. No wonder he had, momentarily, mistakenly fallen into an imaginative delusion.

Most of all, he was deeply fatigued, almost to the point of insensibility. He pulled back the linens at last, preparing to lie down, when another light appeared in his room, which continued to increase until the chamber was lighter than at noonday. With real distress, he looked into it, expecting Lady Catherine again and wondering for his own sanity.

But it was not his aunt, though the resemblance was apparent. Lady Anne Darcy stood looking at him, still as lovely—ethereal, even—as he remembered. Nonetheless, a melancholy unfamiliar to his memories was obvious upon her visage. To his recollection, her normal aspect had always been lively, smiling, and sanguine. A pit of dread lodged in his belly as he wondered whether this new sorrow was all due to him—and the choices he had failed to make.



* * *

"I wish to awaken now," he demanded. Nothing changed, and his mother's apparition only silently watched him. At least she did not appear to be sporting furnishings, musical instruments, or dinnerware. Defiantly, he spoke his thoughts aloud. "I am simply imagining this. It has been a distressing, dreadfully depressing day, and I am out of my head. At least, I am thus momentarily afflicted. I shall lie down now, fall asleep, and awaken in the morning much recovered. If you are the portion of my imagination bent upon lecturing me regarding the folly of taking a wife such as Elizabeth Bennet, you need not bother. I have already disregarded the notion, and will drop the acquaintance entirely."

"Well, Fitzwilliam," the figure replied, "that will make your situation at present more pitiable, but it will have no effect on *me*." She spoke with that exact touch of wry impatience he remembered from his youth, whenever he was slow to recognise what she wished of him. Just as then, he felt the old yearning to please her, to do whatever she wanted in order to ensure her happiness.

He scrambled to his feet. "Mother," he said, and she... brightened. He could not describe it any other way. Suddenly—delusion or dream or apparition, *anything*—he wanted nothing more than to speak to her, as he had wanted to so many times since her unexpected, untimely death in childbed. Unfortunately, he also remembered how tongue-tied he so often became in her presence, and how little he wished to appear foolish or unsophisticated before her. With his father, estate business had forged a common language. Father had spent endless hours patiently instructing him, and as Fitzwilliam did his best to absorb it all and offer as much intelligent contribution as possible, he had earned his father's gratifying approval. But he had been too young when his mother died; she ever remained the lovely, elegant figure perched upon the pedestal of old memory, and he had never learnt to be easy with her.

"Come with me," she said, holding out her hand. Without

hesitation, he took it.

Suddenly, he found himself hurtling through time and space at a dizzyingly rapid speed. Stars loomed overhead, his stomach pitched, and he feared he would be sick. With a hard jolt, he landed in a church pew.

Incredibly, he recognised the building as the village church in Lambton, but the old one that burnt to the ground in '04. With amazement, he realised he was a boy again, perhaps six years of age, sitting stiffly on the bench between his parents, hardly daring to move. And though he looked upon the scene with his adult mind, he was merely a hidden bystander, with the thoughts and behaviours of his six-year-old self as apparent to him as if he relived the moment.

Nor did it take him long to recognise the event; it was the village school's annual pageant performed on Christmas Eve. Mrs Tilbury, the stick-thin schoolmistress, herded her charges to the front, two by two. Since some of them were dressed as sheep and assorted other barnyard animals, she appeared as a female Noah driving her flocks onto the ark.

His adult self could spot all the flaws in costuming—ragged angels, moth-bitten lambs, and a diminutive Joseph beside a much taller Mary. The casting of the holy couple became obvious when it grew apparent that the part of baby Jesus was played by a real infant, who was none too fond of his starring role. To Fitzwilliam's younger self, however, it appeared the epitome of one word: fun.

There were two solos, one duet, and one recitation before the dénouement—the eldest boy intoning the story of an overcrowded inn, a suffering mother, and the promise of divine love, clothed in flesh and come to earth in the lowliest of circumstances. Each of the children moved forward more or less in good time with the recital, alongside heavenly hosts, frightened shepherds, kingly boys bearing gifts, and a valiant, youthful Mary quieting an infant's cry. Even his adult self recognised the simple beauty of it; these humble actors were, in truth, perfectly wonderful in their roles, despite a fussing baby, an angel with only one wing, and wise men kicking and elbowing each other until reproved by the stern frown and threatening brow of their teacher.

But he saw something else as well: the growing enthusiasm within his six-year-old self—the imagination brewing and bubbling beneath his composed exterior. *Stop!* he wanted to cry. *Do not think*

what you are thinking! But of course, he could not stop it. He was a mere spectator to his past, and could only watch as the youthful Fitzwilliam continued to imagine and plan.

He stood silently beside his parents as they solemnly thanked the performers, complimented their presentation, urged them to listen conscientiously to their teacher, and to be good children. Until that point, Darcy had not paid any attention to the sea of faces surrounding them, but of course the mothers and fathers were all in the packed pews, seemingly frozen in place. That was always the way of it—the villagers would not be easy until the Darcys took their finely clothed, censorious selves away. With the wisdom of age, he realised that they saw all the same flaws in the performance that he noticed, and that his presence with his parents had stolen some of their enjoyment of it. Instead of being free to feel pride in their little angels and kings, they had to imagine what criticisms the Darcys must be pronouncing—judgmental, disapproving witnesses to youthful misbehaviours and shabby costumes.

But his youthful self only felt the disappointment of missing out on whatever festivities had been prepared for those who remained, as he followed his father and mother out of the church. Everyone stood stiffly quiet as they departed.

His parents walked swiftly towards their waiting carriage, but he lingered, looking over his shoulder. Already he could hear the sounds of merriment, now that the Darcys were no longer there to dampen their enthusiasm. George had boasted of the carolling, treats, punch, and gaiety that would shortly follow, once the Darcys were out of the way of it all. An estate's steward was not, evidently, an obstacle to happiness—unlike its owner.

"Fitzwilliam," called his father, and he hurried towards the carriage.

For the entire return journey to Pemberley, the idea grew within his young brain. If the Lambton cottagers and Pemberley's tenants could put on such a marvellous performance, why, only think what the Darcys could do! He was certain his mother had magnificent satins, furs, and silks for the robes of angels and kings. Perhaps the servants would even *want* to join the nativity, if they could dress in such splendid garb. But his parents were murmuring quietly to each other, and he dared not interrupt. In fact, they had pulled into the Pemberley drive without a single opportunity presenting itself for him to request anything.

"I do hope the Wentworths have hired superior musicians to their last entertainment," he heard his mother say, and his heart sank. He had utterly forgotten that his parents planned to attend some party or other this evening. A small part of him understood them to be unlikely to agree even had they *not* been going out, but he was utterly captivated by the romance of his *grand idea*. How could they disagree with its brilliance? Moreover, he had witnessed his parents' entertainments from behind the upper stairwell in the past, and they always appeared rather dull. Perhaps they had never before *thought* of such an excellent amusement! Perhaps they would be delighted by its novelty!

Inside Pemberley's vast entry, his mother bent to kiss his cheek, the signal that he should take himself off to the nursery. It was now or never.

"Father, Mother, I wonder whether we could put on our own pageant tonight," he began.

When they frowned, he hastened to explain.

"We wouldn't have all the parts, but Susannah would help, and you could be Mary and Joseph, and I could be the innkeeper," he offered eagerly. "Except, I would say, 'Of *course* you can enter, and take my own bed.' It's changing the story, but that could explain why we don't have all the animals. And Mrs Frost, the stablemaster's wife, has an infant she would loan, I am sure, for she says she is always tired and wishing for a rest from him. We could borrow some hay from Mr Frost, and I promise to clean up every bit of it after we finish. I am a very good reader. I could also play the part of the wise men, and we could pretend—Mother, we could use your jewellery for gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

His parents exchanged glances, and he knew they were thinking of polite ways to refuse him. He increased the rapidity of his speech.

"Or you could play the wise kings, and you could wear your tiara, Mother. You look so beautiful in it. You could be a wise queen. I am certain the Holy Family would not mind."

His father cleared his throat. "Son, your mother and I have accepted an invitation for this evening. We are expected at the Wentworths'. It would be remarkably ill-mannered for us to fail to attend after we gave our word, would it not?"

"We don't have to get a real baby. My stuffed bear, if it were wrapped in swaddling clothes, would serve. And I would play the

shepherd parts, while you, Father, narrated. This is my ‘sore afraid’ face,” Fitzwilliam continued, widening his eyes and waggling his brows in desperate demonstration. “You love to read. Or we could take turns.”

To this day, Darcy had no notion why the idea of a nativity pageant had meant so much to him. Perhaps he had been entranced by the Christmas story, and the concept of a God not eager to pounce upon his every error, but instead a new-born infant, lower than everyone. Lower, even, than a little boy who sometimes forgot to be *gentlemanly*, who must always be an *heir*, and who must somehow learn to shoulder the vastness that was Pemberley and protect everyone in it.

Or perhaps he had simply been very lonely.

“But please!” he begged, as his mother shook her head impatiently. “Please! I promise not to ask for anything again, ever! Just this once!”

Hope filled him as he saw signs that his father was softening, if not towards the pageant, at least enough to offer some sort of compromise. His mother saw it, too.

“Fitzwilliam Sébastien Spencer Darcy, this is what comes of associating with villagers! Stables! Shepherds! We will never attend the school’s pageant again if *this* is the ill-bred sort of behaviour it inspires! Your father *told* you we have commitments elsewhere. You would have us embarrassed before the entire household, and all because you want to play at—at *innkeeping*!”

She said it as though he had begged to run naked through the streets of Lambton. It was the *Christmas story*! In that moment, it seemed as though she hated him, and he was filled with a reckless, impetuous fury. “That’s a lie! You are unfair! I *hate* being a Darcy, and I hate—”

He was not allowed to finish the sentence. His father grabbed him by the arm, towed him into his study, lectured him on the proper way to speak to his lady mother and the respect due his family name, followed by receiving his first—and, thankfully, his last—caning.

He had been sent to his room without supper, but his backside hurt too much to inspire any appetite, regardless. Gingerly, he crept to the nursery, only to discover that Susannah was not there, having been permitted to go to the village Yuletide celebrations. Her sullen younger sister, Nan, plainly peeved at being forced to miss the

festivities, was there to sit with him instead.

In his misery, he did not know whether he could bear her hostility. And he did not wish *anyone* to see him cry. It had been difficult enough to prevent sobbing before his father; he would be unable to hold back his tears for much longer.

“You could go and be with your family,” he offered Nan humbly. “I will go to my bed now, I promise, and I will not leave it.”

“That would be a fine way for my family to lose our places here, wouldn’t it?” she snapped. “There’s not to be a tray for you, I hear. Be a good boy, then, and do go to sleep.”

He limped to his bed, pulled the covers up over his head, and tried to weep as quietly as possible.



* * *

Darcy opened his eyes. He was back, somehow—thankfully without the dizzying journey—in his own room, as his adult self. His cheeks were wet. He stood before his mother once more.

“Thank you for rehearsing one of the most humiliating episodes of my youth,” he said coolly, utterly embarrassed. His posterior smarted with phantom pain, still.

She smiled sadly. “I have witnessed it a hundred times, now,” she said. “Over and over again, from the view of your little eyes. Your eagerness. Your perfect trust in us, as mother and father, who should have cherished and nurtured you. All destroyed in one utterly selfish moment.”

Darcy looked at her with consternation. “Surely not. For one thing, you certainly never laid a hand upon me. If I were to dwell in resentment, it would doubtless be aimed at my father; I can assure you I do not. For another, I like to believe I never repeated my foolishness.”

She sighed. “Your father felt guilty as the devil,” she went on, as though he had not spoken. “He never apologised to you, for it was not done. But he went out of his way to pay you more attention, to

try and compensate for his loss of temper and subsequent poor behaviour. He took you sledding, I believe, as soon as you could sit without undue discomfort. He vowed never again to respond with violence, and he never did. And he had a miserable time at the Wentworths' party, it goes without saying."

"Father was all that was good," Darcy said stiffly.

"He is," she agreed. "I, however, proceeded to enjoy myself at the Wentworths' and never gave the incident much thought. If it crossed my mind at all, it was with justification. You had attempted to interrupt my important plans, you see. You had expressed anger towards me and accused me of injustice. You were disrespectful."

"I believe I learnt from my mistakes," Darcy replied, even more stiffly.

"Oh, you did. You learnt extraordinarily well. You grew more silent, and more dutiful. You weighed every word before you spoke it, and seldom expressed your true feelings, however unhappy. You certainly never asked us to play with you again."

"Naturally, I outgrew such notions, ma'am."

"You were six!" she cried. "The Wentworths' party was a senseless, stupid reason for beating our only child, and I did not see it! I am so very sorry!"

Darcy, keenly uncomfortable, bowed. "Please do not distress yourself, my lady. It was all forgotten, I promise."

Her eyes closed, and she sighed again. "Of course. I knew an apology would be futile. That six-year-old little boy has been gone for a long while, and it was to him I owed it. I did not see all of what I ought to have seen in the time I had with you, but I want you to understand, now, that the example I set for you was often a foolish one. I wish I could undo so much."

"I am sure I do not wish for you to waste a moment's regret upon any childishness of mine," he said sincerely, distressed by the thought of her feeling a failure. He had always loved and esteemed her, although unable to easily express it. She had had powerful notions of duty, and the fact that there was a school at all was due to her influence and many contributions. But she was not finished.

"I was a selfish being all my life, in practice, at least. I taught you what was right—but I did not teach you to correct your temper. You were given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. I, especially, allowed, encouraged, and exhibited a near constant example of selfishness and arrogance. Because I cared for

none beyond my own family circle, because I thought meanly of all the rest of the world, of their sense and worth compared with our own, it is only natural that you should do the same now.”

He grimaced at this description that showed neither of them in a very favourable light. “You were an excellent mother and a perfect mistress to Pemberley, and of course I wish for my future wife to be your equal in both birth and intelligence. But finding such a person has been difficult; I am ill qualified to recommend myself to those unknown to me. I certainly have not the talent, which some people possess, of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done.”

His mother, to his surprise, began reciting Shakespeare. ““When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes, I all alone bewEEP my outcast state, And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, And look upon myself and curse my fate?”” She phrased the sonnet as a question; her tone of wry impatience had returned.

The devil of it was, she was not wrong; he lived a blessed existence granted by wealth and privilege, and ought to have put himself forward in duty to his progeny and his sister well before this. Darcy sighed. “It is a hard lesson you have been, er, sent here to teach,” he said, bowing again. “By you, I have been properly humbled. You are correct, of course. I have not taken the trouble.”

She smiled sadly. “You have always been so very much like your father,” she said. “A good man. The very best of men.” The edges of the light surrounding her began to darken.

“Wait! Mother!” he cried. Dream or not, he had never been able to say a final farewell! There was so much left unsaid, so many words they had yet to speak. The light paused momentarily, but he was tongue-tied again—without, as he had just bemoaned, any skill for reviving the conversation. “Good-bye,” he managed, and felt stupid when the room fell to sudden darkness once again.

Lighting a candle, Darcy began pacing. What had it meant? Or did it mean nothing? Surely it was all a figment of his imagination, triggered somehow by his aunt’s unexpected demise! But how could he have crafted such a vision of his mother? He had not lied—he had entirely forgotten the youthful incident. There must be some rationale for his brain reminding him of it, but he could not think what it could be. As he had explained to...to the *hallucination*, if he were to feel resentment, it ought to have been directed at his father!

And he did not! His father had not been perfect, of course, as the very memory showed. He hoped to never respond so harshly towards a child, no matter the provocation.

His love for me was certain, regardless. I knew it.

Could it be...could his conscience be responding to some overlooked flaw or consequence of behaviour? Had he failed to perceive something—something important, something regrettable? Had he wronged someone and failed to notice...or care?

His mind fixed upon a memory, of a place he had not wanted to be, and all the people he had not wished to be in company with... and the ungentlemanly words he had offered.

‘She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me.’

He had known Miss Elizabeth heard him. Simply because he had been full of resentment at the time—impelled to attend an assembly when he was vexed and distraught by his sister’s situation and in no mood for enjoyment—he had felt justified in lashing out, to both his friend and anyone unlucky enough to be within range of his voice.

Of course, it was not long afterwards that he thought the lady he had so boldly declared barely ‘tolerable’ to be the handsomest lady of his acquaintance.

He had assumed, because he had paid her some attention after the incident, that she would realise he had not meant for her to take the insult personally. He had assumed that asking her to dance at the ball at Netherfield was a signal to her that she was, absolutely, handsome enough to tempt him.

I did not apologise. Not ever. Even if she did not take the insult personally, she was surely owed an apology.

Yet he knew Wickham had been speaking with her, the misbegotten scoundrel saying who-knew-what lies. And what had he done to prevent Wickham from wreaking his usual havoc upon the people of Meryton—knowing, as he certainly did, the man’s propensity for vicious behaviours? *Nothing*. Not once had he made any effort whatsoever to correct or mitigate Wickham’s influence. He had overheard Mrs Bennet’s ill opinion of himself and had not cared, because he thought her ridiculous. She was not refined, true, but that only meant she would not hide her opinions behind a mannerly masquerade.

The Bennet ladies have nothing to fear from Wickham! he comforted himself. They are too well born to molest, and too poor to be victimised by schemes such as Georgiana endured.

But they *were* pretty and convivial and...sheltered.

He sat upon his bed, head in his hands, scrubbing his face. Even if he was overtired, distraught, and dreaming, he could not deny his recent selfish, ungentlemanly conduct. Perhaps he could find some means of placing a letter into Miss Elizabeth's hands? An apology, with a warning? He had no doubt that an explanation shared in confidence was safe in her care.

But was such an apology good enough? It might protect his reputation in *her* eyes, to be sure. Nevertheless, could others be at risk? By informing only her, was he not still behaving selfishly? Miss Elizabeth could never shield her community from such a villain, especially with information given in utmost confidentiality.

Sighing, he lay back amongst the pillows, thinking of the names of those he must correspond with to disclose at least *some* evidence of Wickham's nefarious character. Sir William Lucas, Mr Bennet, Mr Goulding, certainly. Perhaps Philips? The thought of exposing himself, if not his sister, as the dupe of such as Wickham before these men made him groan. He could only imagine Sir William's effusions, Mr Bennet's smirk, and Philips's too-interested questions. A deep yet unfamiliar emotion—a brew of wounded pride, fatigue, frustration, and even hurt at his unreasonable, unacknowledged, unattainable love for Elizabeth—swept through him in a wave.

"I wish I had never gone to Hertfordshire, to Netherfield, to Meryton, and never met any of the Bennets at all!" he cried aloud.

The sound of a throat clearing caught his attention, and he looked up sharply.

There, in a long, black robe, stood a figure much resembling Mr William Collins, the heir of Longbourn and lately the vicar of Hunsford parish. It bowed very low.

"Your wish is my command," said the Collins-like spectre. "I beg your pardon for not having offered my services earlier."

Darcy closed his eyes. The deranged dream had degenerated into a night terror.



*“If we shadows have offended, think but this and all is mended,
that you have but slumber’d here, while these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme, no more yielding but a dream.”*

Puck, A Midsummer Night’s Dream

December 23, 1811 (continued)

The strangest thing about the apparition wearing Collins’s face was its silence. When Darcy opened his eyes once again, the entity only stood there, staring. Perhaps it was not *truly* Collins—it was not like he had scrutinised the man’s appearance. Certainly he could not remember a time when the rector missed an opportunity for sycophantic fawning, excessive flattery, or ridiculous opinions. His

aunt had deeply enjoyed such toadying reverence; he despised it, and despised Collins with a virulent aversion.

Of course at this moment, when he was questioning everything, he must needs question his abhorrence of the vicar, as well.

His first interaction with the man had been at the ball at Netherfield, when Collins had pushed his way forward and demanded to introduce himself. It was rude, of course, which was distasteful, but naturally—and especially in crowded venues—others had made themselves known to him with equivalent presumption and received a good deal more tolerance.

It might have been the way he had paired his name so freely with the Bennets, while ensuring Darcy recognised the connexion between himself and his aunt—trading on both. And yet, a certain amount of social climbing was always understandable. In the case of Bingley, he had taken Darcy for a model of gentlemanly behaviour as well as a friend, and—not to mince words—had used their friendship to elevate his family. What was the difference, truly?

Bingley would do anything for me and mine. Perhaps, in the beginning, he would not have been so loyal, but he had wanted a genuine connexion, and strove to practise the type of friendship he wished to receive from Darcy.

Genuine. That was the word for Bingley. Collins had wanted the respect and the connexion upon the basis of whom he knew and his thin ties of blood to mere acquaintance. He expected nothing of himself in exchange, except for his efforts in advancing his own introduction.

If I found myself penniless tomorrow, Bingley would still take me in, while Collins would drop the acquaintance as quickly as possible. It was ample justification for his dislike.

Of course, Bingley's youngest sister would do the same, and I tolerate her. Darcy sighed yet again. But the Collins-like apparition was pointing to a door of his chambers, as if he should leave his room.

Darcy's instinct was to pull the covers over his head and ignore the whole thing. Certainly, the temptation to do so was strong. Unfortunately, though half-afraid he had descended into madness, he feared even more that he had somehow lost himself—his very identity. This evening, while making ready for bed, he had been convinced of the world and his place in it. In the course of these irrational dreams, the foundations of those beliefs, set in stone for

so long, had cracked. It seemed vital, somehow, to examine the fissures more carefully; if he did not—as fanciful and foolish as it sounded—he might always wonder whether he could ever think himself a gentleman again.

Thus, he acted as the spectre seemed to demand, opening the door and walking through it. And found himself not in his dressing room, as he ought to be, but in a large room wholly unfamiliar to him.

It was also loud, with the noises of popping corks, boisterous speech, and raucous laughter assailing his ears. A party of some sort, then. The people were all strangers to him; many were more finely clothed than others, but the sight of the skimpily clad women told him that this was not the sort of party where he would find ladies of quality in attendance. The room's *décor* was the type that showed all rich, velvety reds and glistening golds in candlelight, but in the bright light of day would appear seedy and vulgar. Most likely a brothel—and not one of the more discreet ones.

His first thought was to dash right back out again—this was *not* the place he wished to be caught dressed only in his banyan—but the door through which he had entered was now a wall of red-flocked paper, exhibiting a lewd portrait. Collins was nowhere to be seen. Nevertheless, no one seemed to notice Darcy. While they did not precisely *walk* through him, they *looked* through him as if he were not there.

There must be a connexion to his life somehow, as ill as the thought might be. And then he saw her.

Lydia Bennet stood not three feet from him, laughing loudly, a glass of wine in her hand. She wore a gaudy, revealing dress, and her familiarity with those surrounding her made it clear that she was no stranger to this establishment. In his shock and horror, he completely forgot his lack of clothing and desire to remain unnoticed, striding directly to her.

“Lydia Bennet, you will come with me at once!” he ordered sternly. “Let us leave this place *immediately*.”

She did not respond in any way—only laughed at a remark from one of the other men. In fact, none of her circle seemed to hear him or pay him any mind. He tried to grasp her arm, but directly found himself several feet away.

“I propose a toast!” shouted a corpulent man near the stairs. He wore striped breeches that appeared ready to split at the seams,

topped by an ugly purple tailcoat.

"To wine and women, song and laughter, and never a thought for the morning after!"

"Hear, hear," chorused the other patrons, raising their glasses.

"To a happy Christmas and a prosperous 1815!"

"Hear, hear!" cried the crowd. "To 1815!"

1815? Darcy thought, taken aback. It was not yet even 1812! Again, he drew nearer to Lydia. This time he examined her more closely; she was still quite young, but there was a coarseness to her features that had not been there the last time he had seen her, perhaps the result of heavy applications of rouge and face powder. Her hair was lank and oily; she held her glass out to be refilled, laughing stridently. It was no stretch to imagine her aged an additional three years—truthfully, she looked as though she had aged more than three.

"Lydia, my sweet flower!" called a voice from behind him, and Darcy stiffened. He knew that voice—oh yes, he did. George Wickham sauntered in, placing an arm about her, resting his hand most familiarly upon her person.

"George!" Lydia said, smiling eagerly up at him with a puppyish sort of adoration.

"You despicable cur! Take your hands off her!" Darcy shouted, but no one heard him or responded. His own hands fisted in frustration.

Wickham kissed her quite ardently upon the lips, to a chorus of catcalls and whistles. "Merry Christmas, dearest pet," he replied fondly, adoringly. And then he whispered something in her ear.

Her expression fell, and she looked up at him pleadingly.

His face, in return, was implacable, uncompromising.

With a heavy sigh, she gulped down her wine, then sauntered over to the corpulent man in purple and took his arm. He grinned, his smile full of rotten and missing teeth, and pulled her none-too-gently up the stairs.

Darcy stood with his mouth agape. This was unpalatable, unbelievable, unacceptable! He wanted to stop it all, but though he tried to follow, his feet were prevented from making forward progress. George Wickham did not even glance after her, embracing instead another of the women present.

"This cannot be happening," Darcy muttered.

"Oh, but it can," replied the unctuous, oily voice of the phantom

Collins from a few feet away. "Be assured, my dear sir, that I most sincerely sympathise with you in your present distress, which must be of the bitterest kind—to know that a person whom you once condescended to acknowledge should be guilty of this licentiousness of behaviour."

"Cannot you see, you supercilious oaf? She is completely under that villain's thumb! I do not know where her parents are, but—"

"They have thrown her off," he said with a smug sort of pity. "Alas, her death would have been a blessing. But of course, they pretend."

Darcy narrowed his eyes and made a threatening move towards the vicar, but suddenly, Collins was gone, as was the brothel. Another door stood before him instead, and Darcy walked through it most reluctantly.

But it was a quiet study he entered this time. A man, his back to Darcy, sat writing at a desk by the light of several candles. He was dressed prosperously, and a healthy fire burnt at his hearth. The furnishings were tasteful and masculine; the room's occupant dipped his pen into the inkwell and wrote another line before setting it down with a sigh. Cautiously, Darcy approached him.

"Bingley?" he asked with some surprise. The man possessed silvering hair at his temples, appearing perhaps forty years of age. Still handsome, there was a solemnity etched upon his features, the exact opposite of Darcy's gregarious friend. But of course, Bingley—for it was, indeed, him—neither heard nor saw him.

Darcy peered over at the letter Bingley had been writing, noting the date—December 24th, 1826. Unfortunately, his friend's handwriting had not much improved over the years; Darcy squinted at the rest of the letter, trying to make it out.

But translating Bingley's hieroglyphics proved unnecessary. From his pocket, Bingley removed a miniature encased in a gold locket and set it, opened, on the desk before him.

Why does Bingley possess a miniature portrait of Jane Bennet? Had he married the girl after all?

And then, Bingley commenced reading aloud.

"To my dearest angel," he began, causing Darcy to immediately search for a means of escape. Whether addressing a wife or no, whatever his friend was about to say was deeply personal. But there was nowhere to go; neither was there any sign of the phantom vicar. He tried covering his ears, but he found no reprieve from

Bingley's resonating voice.

Evidently, Darcy was here to eavesdrop, and eavesdrop he would.

"It has been many years since I saw you last, but I think of you often...almost daily," Bingley continued. "It is a relief, I admit, on those days which are so busy that my mind cannot dwell upon you for any length, and yet there is a sorrow in it, as well. I am damned for missing you, and damned for being prevented from doing so—there is no pleasing Charles Bingley, is there?"

He paused for a moment, shaking his head, and Darcy wondered...had the eldest Bennet sister died? Had Charles married her, defying friends and family, only to lose her? But Bingley was speaking again.

"I hope your life is uniformly happy and without troubles. I hope you are extremely satisfied in your motherhood and numerous friendships."

Not dead, then. At least Elizabeth does not bear that burden of grief. Would Elizabeth's name be mentioned now, in this unusual letter? And why would Bingley write it in the first place? It was hardly proper for him to send such a thing to a married woman who was no relation.

"I admit that I have not always been so magnanimous. When I wrote to you last year, I know I railed against the man who is your children's father, the children of mine you would not bear. I suppose I drank too much at dinner, and wasted my one indulgence to this unrequited love, my annual Christmas letter to you, on jealousy and despair. I promise, I drank only water tonight so I would not malign you so again. How could I? If you were never my bride, it is only my own fault. I know you must have awaited my return. But I listened to the reasonings of my sisters, and I failed you. I simply was not confident enough in myself; I met you perhaps a year or so too soon. But my heart, once truly given, could never stray. It is yours, though you no longer need nor want it. I could never marry another; I cannot seem to get out of the habit of belonging to you."

Fifteen years later and he still regrets her! This cannot be real!

"I know you have heard this all before. I am not clever, am I? If I could turn back time, I would come for you. Since I cannot, I watch over you from afar. I dare not approach you in any manner, but my man of business frequents your husband's shop on occasion,

ensuring all is well as best he can. He reports that the premises appear prosperous, for which I am thankful. However, if it became obvious that there was need or want—well, I would help. Somehow, I would find a way to aid you, and be grateful I could.”

“Sentinel of Jane Bennet’s husband’s business? Preposterous!” Darcy cried aloud, now standing directly in front of his friend, resting his hands on Bingley’s desk. But his own heart whispered a shockingly agreeable thought: *I could watch over Elizabeth, at least enough to ensure she does not ever suffer from poverty or want.* He pushed the notion away. This was madness!

“Your husband does not deserve you, of course,” Bingley continued on, insensible to any interruption. “Not that any man could, but he does not even try, which is the hardest to bear of all. To know he has a gracious and lovely angel on his arm as the mother of his children, yet is disloyal to you—I cannot fathom it. My friend, Darcy, has explained many times why it would be wrong to interfere, but the only true reason keeping me from it is the pain it would cause you. Perhaps you do not know, and remain blissfully ignorant of his indiscretions. I pray it is so.”

Darcy looked into his friend’s eyes; they held a world of sorrow. At that moment, he grew certain—absolutely certain—that Bingley would never post this letter.

“I wish you the happiest of Christmases, my love, this year, ever, and always. From the bottom of my empty heart, I regret your loss, made especially bitter by my own culpability in losing you. I only tell you once a year now, instead of daily or weekly. However, my affections remain unchanged. They are ever yours, as am I.”

Heaving a great sigh, he sanded the letter, as though it could matter whether the ink smeared. Carefully, precisely, he folded it, stood, and walked towards the hearth.

“I wish...I wish Darcy had met you, just one time, so he would know how priceless you are. I cannot help but think he would have urged me to marry you, had he met you even once.”

Darcy straightened. What was this? He had been in company with Miss Bennet many times. Surely this was wholly a fantasy, a dream, with *nothing* of reality to it?

Bingley took a last look at the letter, placed a kiss upon it, and threw it into the flames. One tear slid down his cheek, then another.

“This was not my fault,” Darcy said aloud.

“Oh, no, certainly it was not,” the phantom vicar replied,

startling Darcy with his sudden reappearance. "You wished for a world in which you had never met any of the Bennets, and I have done my best to show it to you. I am ever your servant."

Darcy took a deep breath of relief.

"Of course, however, you cannot deny that you have been the principal, if not the only means of dividing them from each other in the *present*, involving them both in misery of the acutest kind." He steepled his fingers, his tone pontificating. "Perhaps your friend is simply not formed for happiness, no matter his circumstance, and you have merely enacted a sort of divine execution of it."

"I *thought* I acted in his best interests!" Darcy countered. "Miss Bennet certainly showed no sign that her heart was engaged. A man ought never to pursue a connexion of unequal affections."

"I have the highest opinion in the world of your excellent judgment in all matters within the scope of your understanding," the phantom said obsequiously, bowing, while his expression assumed a maddeningly condescending mien. "Permit me to say, however, that there must be a wide difference between the perception of minds and hearts amongst the laity and those of the clergy. A little show of unwillingness is a ladylike indication of regard. The usual practice of elegant females is to increase our love by suspense. One must never assume a lady is serious in her rejection when a greater mind has determined the advantages. It is the height of coquetry and charm."

Darcy could only look at him with a restrained sort of wonder. The vicar must be a constant source of entertainment to one such as Elizabeth's father, who most enjoyed poking fun at those least likely to detect any mockery. As for himself, he had discovered at least one true inducement for his inherent disgust of the man: his belief that women were *incapable* of any true expression of emotion. His accusations of female coquetry were awkward at best, sinister at worst, and certainly not the manner of a gentleman. And yet...

He found himself searching his memory for a time when Miss Elizabeth had *welcomed* his company—*any* expression of delight or even warmth. She was, of course, a warm and delightful person, but had any of it been directed especially towards himself? Unfortunately, though he had studied intently for any sign of Miss Bennet's regard for Bingley, he had significantly failed to search for clues as to whether Miss Elizabeth held any regard for *him*. He had only assumed—assumed her circumstance in life meant she would

have to love him, should he bother to love her.

He had paid so little attention. However, if *Wickham* had been watching, he most certainly would have detected Darcy's eye upon Miss Elizabeth. Had he not been jealous of her defence of the churl, when she had spoken of him during their one dance? He had excused her for it, of course—she could not be expected to know his enemy's lies. But that was the problem, was it not? Miss Elizabeth was far too sensible to make away with an impoverished soldier. Yet, if her sympathies had been stirred against himself, she was too upright in character to simply excuse Fitzwilliam Darcy without any explanation.

Was she to believe in his goodness merely because *Miss Bingley* claimed it to be so?

It was all too much. This madness needed to stop, before a dreadful bitterness of spirit consumed him.

"I have had quite enough," Darcy pronounced. "Pray return me to my own chambers."

But the phantom only looked down his nose. "Pardon me for neglecting a compliance, which on every other demand shall be my constant resolution, though in the case before us I consider myself more fitted to decide on what is best than any gentleman, however learned."

Infuriating fool! Darcy turned away from the vicarly apparition and from Bingley, giving them both his back. Everything he had viewed this night had wrought painful havoc with his understanding, and now he was the helpless prisoner of a ghastly guide. A creeping fear began to overtake him. All of his 'visitors' this eve had been dead ones...well, he supposed he did not know for a fact that the vicar of Hunsford parsonage was dead, but he certainly might be.

Could I have died as well? Perhaps in my sleep, between one breath and the next, as my father did, without sign or warning? Horrifying as the thought was, he was determined to know the truth.

"Have I died, and your presence is a judgment upon me?"

The odious vicar laughed, a peculiar, high-pitched sort of giggle that did nothing to reassure his listener. "It is particularly incumbent on those who never change their opinion, to be secure of judging properly at first."

Darcy swivelled sharply towards the vicar. "Who told you that? Miss Elizabeth?" But he—*it*?— had vanished into thin air. Darcy

looked over his shoulder towards Bingley, but he was gone as well.

There was a new door before him, however, and he hesitated. If he would not walk through it, would this...dream or vision or illusion end? Or would he?

Grimacing, he pushed his way forward.

It was a fine parlour, the furnishings of highest quality, if a bit over-decorated. There, on an ornately gilded settee, sat Elizabeth Bennet, a sewing basket by her side. Head bent, she stitched a delicate linen with an intricate pattern of ivory on white.

How he knew it was *her*, he could not say. Though he had not yet seen her face, he knew she was no longer young. A neat cap covered her dark hair, but escaping curls were dusted with grey, and the fingers carefully handling the fabric bore some marks of aging. Even so, knew her he did, and he knew she was beautiful, still.

She looked up then and proved it—her fine eyes, large and slightly arched; her lips, perfectly shaped; her chin, ever determined. In her late forties, perhaps, she was nevertheless handsome, for hers was a beauty that would never fade. His heart caught in his throat as her eyes met his...but hers slid past him to something or someone behind him.

Was he to see her husband, the fortunate man who had won her heart, her respect, her hand? Or a sweet, dark-haired granddaughter, coming to sit beside her grandmama?

Instead, a tiny woman, stick-thin, entered. Her face was inscrutable and wrinkled like a dried apple—she could have been a century old. Elizabeth hurried to her side. The woman regally gave Elizabeth her arm, allowing her to guide her into a chair. Elizabeth busied herself positioning her footstool and quietly asking whether she wished for a tea tray, which was refused. She returned to her seat in the ensuing silence.

Elizabeth did not take up the sewing she had set aside. Hands folded neatly in her lap, she simply observed the other woman. After about ten minutes, the smaller woman murmured something in such a low voice that, despite the quietness of the room, Darcy failed to hear. Elizabeth rose, rearranged the screen to the woman's satisfaction, and resumed her seat once more, folding her hands again upon her lap.

And that was all. Darcy was utterly perplexed. While he could happily, he discovered, gaze upon Elizabeth Bennet for a dozen

years without growing bored, the utter stillness was the opposite of her nature. For her, tramping merrily across woods and fields, reading a good book and discussing it with another, or—as she had been when he entered—stitching some pretty needlework, were her usual occupations. She was an excellent and witty conversationalist, gregarious and convivial without volubility. This studied taciturnity was incredible, and certainly must have been difficult for one formerly so energetic.

“Miss Elizabeth, please, tell me how you have fared,” Darcy begged. But neither woman heard. After a time, he simply sat on the settee beside her. Although to his observation, the cushion compressed with his weight, and he was so near he could feel the heat from her body, she, plainly, had no idea of his presence.

He was uncertain how to proceed. If neither would talk, there seemed little else to be discovered. And so, he...simply sat. Had someone told him that he would so easily and gladly agree to remain beside another in silence, without acknowledgement, without knowing how long it might be before he could leave or speak, he might have called them foolish. But he had thought he would never see Elizabeth again, and though he longed to hear her voice, he had *missed* her. No longer could he remember why it had seemed so urgent to distance himself from her. Rather, it had been an honour and privilege to be counted within her circle of acquaintance.

I have been stupid. Stupid and short-sighted. Blind.

After many minutes of observation, however, he determined that Elizabeth was not quite so still, and certainly not as at ease, as he had first believed. Though her hands were folded in her lap, her knuckles were white as she squeezed them together. Her eyes blinked rapidly, as if she restrained tears.

“What is the matter, dearest?” he asked gently, even knowing she could not hear him. She waited there with an almost desperate inertia as the minutes ticked slowly by. Finally, a clock somewhere struck eight chimes. As if it were a signal, Elizabeth stood and moved the tiny lady’s footstool, then helped her to her feet.

“Miss de Bourgh,” she said quietly. “I wonder whether you would permit me to take myself to London on the early post tomorrow to visit my sister Jane, to be returned by evening. Dawson will be here, of course, and I would be back to Rosings by dinner. As you might remember, I have been unable to see my

family in over a year, due to your last illness. For the day only.”

Anne? This tiny, ancient figure was Anne? Why, she was his own age! Even if Elizabeth were fifty years, Anne would be fifty-seven—aging, certainly, but not in her dotage. Had a lifetime of potions and pills ruined her health? Of course, she had never had much health to speak of. And Elizabeth—dearest, loveliest Elizabeth—was her *companion*? The best woman in England had replaced Ida Jenkinson?

While he had been thinking these incredulous thoughts, Elizabeth waited patiently for Anne’s reply. The tension in her shoulders and the lift of her chin showed the depth of her concern for what it would be.

“Abandon me for your sister’s company if you must, but do not bother returning if you do. Mrs Jenkinson’s youngest niece has written again. She has been pestering me for a position this age. I shall send someone to the village to fetch her in the morning.”

For one moment, and one moment only, he saw Elizabeth’s despair. And then it vanished, her answer as smooth as if nothing had ever occurred to distress her.

“There is no need for it, Miss de Bourgh. Of course I shall not go if you do not wish it. Oh, and your cousin, the earl, has sent another letter, asking to be permitted a short visit. He and his wife are in town, and hope you will allow them to come, for even a brief call, on Christmas Day.” She spoke evenly, no hint of her disappointment in her well-modulated tone—yet he knew she adored her sister. To sacrifice all visitation for a *year*, perhaps more?

How long had it taken her to learn to hide any hint of feeling?

“You know I do not see my family. It is out of the question.”

What was this?

“Very good, ma’am. I will write your answer to the earl.”

“There has been entirely too much chatter this evening. It has given me a megrim. Call Dawson to bring my tonic before you retire.”

Elizabeth curtsied, nodded, and trailed her out of the room.

Darcy could only remain where he was in open-mouthed astonishment. Apparently, silence was a requirement of his cousin’s employ. Rather, not a total silence, but a complete subservience, without benefit of ladylike occupations, such as sewing, allowed in her presence. Was Elizabeth not even given a half-day off, without threat of losing her position? Anne’s family—which included

himself, no doubt—was not permitted to visit? Was *anyone*? Did she wait upon his sickly, fractious cousin without company or entertainment of any kind? Plainly, she had waited all day to ask her meagre favour, only to be refused. Did she weep now in her lonely bed? Why would Elizabeth remain in such dreadful circumstances?

There was only one answer. Miss Elizabeth's father must have died; her mother's fears of the hedgerows had been realised. Elizabeth *must* have had offers—she was too intelligent, too desirable not to have. No, she had accepted this position because it met other needs. Anne must pay—and pay exceedingly well—for such attendance from such a person. If Mrs Bennet yet lived, or any sisters remained unwed, Elizabeth's pay would be stretched to include whatever necessities her family required. Perhaps Anne even enjoyed keeping Elizabeth—who, though in many ways her peer, was her exact opposite, possessing every gift fate had failed to bestow in her own case—thus imprisoned and dependent.

He felt sickened.

“Collins!” he yelled. “Collins!”

And there the vicar sat, in the overstuffed chair so recently vacated by Anne de Bourgh, his face a study in innocence.

“What is this?” Darcy shouted. “Who are you? *Why you?*?”

“I consider the clerical office as equal in point of consideration and comprehension with the highest rank in the kingdom. You must therefore allow me to follow the dictates of my conscience on this occasion, which leads me to perform what I look on as a point of duty.”

“You talk and you talk,” Darcy interpolated bitterly, “but with every word spoken, you say less.”

“It is required of every man,” the vicar continued as if unaware of the interruption, his tone pontificating, “that the spirit within him should walk abroad amongst his fellow men and travel far and wide, and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it shrivels, it shrinks, it withers. I have permitted you to witness those with whom you would *not* share your better self. You *might* have shared, might even have turned those experiences to happiness, theirs or perhaps your own. I am *your* spirit, a haughty figure of pride and conceit only *you* could have created. Your contempt for me is obvious, and yet—though sick of civility, deference, and officious attention—you snub and reject the first person refusing to pay that approbation which so

disgusts you.”

Darcy’s fists clenched in rage and frustration. “What nonsense! Courtesy of *you*, I have witnessed a grim future in which the Bennets never met me! But they *have* met me! You know they have! I demand you show me what has changed!”

For a moment, the phantom vicar only looked at him, his expression both imperious and impassive. But at last, he spoke. “Why, nothing has changed at all, good sir,” he replied coolly. “*You did not stay.*”

And he vanished.



* * *

It was with a sense of near anguish that Darcy wondered what awful scenes he would next behold.

However, and much to his great relief, he suddenly found himself within a reassuringly familiar passageway at Pemberley—just before the door of the gold salon. It was his least favourite of the many parlours in the great house, but he had never had it redone because it had been his mother’s especial favourite. The door was ajar, and he gladly walked through it, grateful to be in a recognisable location.

The room was large and ornately decorated in gilt and shades of gold. *Not gaudy*, he thought, staring at it critically, *but rather uselessly fine; there is nothing welcoming or comfortable, and those chairs are the very devil if one must sit for any length of time.* A man and woman were seated before the fire, their backs to him, one on either side of the hearth like a matched set of bookends. He could not tell who they were, only that they were elderly, judging by their silvered hair.

The man stood, walking forward to lean against the chimney-piece, and Darcy’s heart leapt in his chest. “Father!” he cried aloud. Of course, he ought to have expected no answer—and he did not, truly—but he gazed upon him with moistened eyes. Here was the

man he had, for so long, honoured and revered. Also, this time, in this vision, Darcy was no silly six-year-old, locked into the memories and actions of his childish self.

And yet, there was something...off. The man appeared to be an inch or two taller than Father, for one thing. For another, his father's hair had been thinning in those final years, and this man's hair was thick, still, with a bit of curl. Then the man looked directly at him, and it was like looking into the mirror at an older version of himself. It was himself, perhaps forty years hence.

"I have accepted the invitation to the Cavanaugh ball," said the woman, whose face was still hidden from him. "I shall buy a new dress for the affair, as Lady Markham is sure to attend, and her pride in her dressmaker is too, too ridiculous. Madame Marchand is quite superior in every respect, and her laces are directly from the Loire Valley, you know. Why, I could not believe Sir Henry complimented her ladyship's ensemble so baldly, when everyone knows she merely copied the marchioness's pattern with an inferior fabric."

In this manner, the woman rattled on. Darcy studied his elder self curiously. His eyes were...empty. He pretended to mind the woman's words in a jaded, world-weary sort of manner, although it was obvious most of his attention resided elsewhere. However, he did nothing to take charge of the situation or attempt to turn the conversation. Plainly, no answer was required to any of these insipid observations, nor did he attempt any, not even a grunt of agreement or disapproval.

The topic of fashion being exorcised, the woman moved on to the doings of her neighbours. "It is said that Mr Ringleton is fascinated by the sister of his nephew's wife. I never could understand what he sees in Mrs Ringleton, when he could have married anyone." In blunt terms, she gave an intimate recital of the 'facts' of their marriage as she understood them, including several no one ought ever to have said aloud.

"Stop her from speaking!" he shouted at himself. "Whether true or false, it is all appalling, demeaning, and unfortunate!" But his elder self simply stood there, propped by the hearth like a fire iron.

Perhaps I have gone deaf, he thought with a forlorn sense of hope as she continued to spew vitriol and venom, foolishness and folly.

"Fitzwilliam, are you listening to me? I asked you whether you sent your regrets to Lord Butterfield. You cannot possibly go

hunting on the weekend of Sir Percy's fete."

"Yes, madam," he replied. Since the woman had not shouted to make herself heard, he must conclude that he was indeed aware of her prattle.

The truth was obvious: he had become, simply, irrelevant.

This, then, was the summit and summary of his personal life—all of it lived with some jewel of the *ton*, her head empty of anything of importance. Had she entrapped him with her arts and allurements? Had he been tempted by her fortune and connexions? And, most of all, did he know her now, or would he be able to recognise her elderly self? He could change, at least, this much of his future, could he not?

Taking a deep breath, he strode to a position where he could see her face. And stopped short.

He would, most likely, recognise Caroline Bingley were she a hundred—she had always been handsome, and was stately in appearance, still.

But he had *never* had any feeling for her, no attraction beyond a basic appreciation of face and figure, and no desire, *ever*, to join her life with his.

Why had he done this thing? What possible reason could he have had for marrying a woman with whom he shared no affection, no liking, or any deeper emotion—and what was more, no possible chance of it ever kindling?

The answer came to him between one breath and the next.

He had not cared, because his heart was dead. The organ that beat in his chest might function, but there was no feeling, no depth, no sensitivity, no compassion nor vitality within the blood it carried to his body. And he knew, with every fibre of his being, just who was responsible for murdering it.

He had killed it himself.



“If it be thus to dream, still let me sleep!”

Sebastian, Twelfth Night Act 4

Arthur Pennywithers had valeted with Fitzwilliam Darcy for over five years, and had never been dissatisfied with his position. Mr Darcy was neither unpleasant nor unkind, a liberal employer who treated him fairly. Beyond this, being both agreeably fine-looking and of considerable stature, Mr Darcy looked well in whatever attire was chosen for him—a definite credit to Arthur’s standing.

In the last several days, however, Arthur had cause for concern. Circles beneath his employer’s eyes bespoke sleepless nights, and his attention to detail—always superior—suffered. As he entered his

master's bedchamber at dawn's early light, he hoped to find him resting peacefully.

At first, he believed the wish fulfilled. However, abruptly, Mr Darcy sat straight up in bed, gasping, his eyes wild; without warning, he nearly leapt from the mattress, swivelling round as if being attacked from all sides. As Pennywithers looked on in some dismay, his employer ran to the mirror, peering within as if he expected to see a different face, scrubbing his hands through his sleep-mussed hair.

"I believe you are a bit young to be concerned about your hair colour, sir," he offered.

Mr Darcy jumped a little, but upon recognition, asked frantically, "What day is it?"

Plainly, some awful dream had disoriented him. "Tuesday, sir."

"What date? What year?"

This response showed worse than the effects of a simple dream. Perhaps he had contracted a fever?

"Are you feeling well, sir? Ought I to call the apothecary?"

"Please, man, answer the question."

Arthur could not help the rise of his brows—or the slight sarcasm—inspired by his master's fervour. "It is the twenty-fourth of December, year of our Lord eighteen hundred eleven."

Then, completely beyond any expectation, Mr Darcy...chuckled. He was not, and never had been, a chuckling sort of fellow.

"Excellent! Astonishing! I have not missed it. The dreams have done it all in one night. Or was it angels? Of course it was—they can do what they like. Send word to Miss Darcy, if you would—we shall be making a journey to Hertfordshire. She should dress warmly." But then his face fell. "Oh—rather—Pennywithers, do you have family in town?"

Arthur's alarm grew at this unusual stream of volubility from his solemn employer. "I—I have a brother, sir."

"I wish to go to Hertfordshire—and at once. Bingley will travel with us as well, I believe. However, I completely understand if you need time. Time to spend with your family, that is. You and Miss Darcy's maid will take the brougham but may wait a few days to follow us. I am certain we can make do without you for a short while, until your Christmas celebrations are past."

At this shocking offer, Arthur wondered how expeditiously the family physician might be summoned. He could only imagine what

Miss Darcy's maid, the indefatigable Alice, would say to leaving her charge to 'make do'. "I am afraid I do not understand you, sir."

"It is Christmas Eve, Pennywithers! What is to understand?" He clapped the valet on the shoulders. "And a new day! A new, wonderful and fortunate day!"

"I knew you ought not to have ridden yesterday. You have taken a chill. I shall call the physician." He played his trump card. "You would not like for Miss Darcy to catch whatever it is that ails you."

But Mr Darcy only chuckled again. "Pennywithers, my good man, there is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humour. I *pray* I am catching and *she* is infected! And yourself, as well!"

What had happened to the grave, somewhat dull and fastidious gentleman—who rarely smiled and never laughed—whom he had put to bed the night before? It took some moments for Pennywithers to recover enough to reply, but there was never any doubt in his mind as to what his answer would be.

"My brother's is a bachelor household, sir, and cannot be depended upon for much in the way of Christmas festivities. I will accompany you wherever you decide to go, if it pleases."



* * *

"Yes, sir. 'Tis naught but a bit of damp, sir, and 'appy I am to do it, and anything else ye've a mind to 'ave fetched today! Thank ye, sir!" The footman practically danced out the door in his eagerness to accomplish the requested errand, although the weather was something more than 'a bit of damp'. Darcy felt somewhat guilty about sending his people out into it, even though he had provided extra compensation for the trouble. Besides which, the entire household had received their Christmas stipends a day early—with an additional guinea besides—and thus the general mood could be described as remarkably cheerful, despite the expresses to be sent, trunks to be packed, and the Darcy vehicles to be made ready for

immediate travel.

Darcy had never been wished such enthusiastic 'Merry Christmas!' salutations in all his life, and he was gladdened by it. Still, as his sister walked slowly towards him down the spiral staircase, he was somewhat uncertain what to say to her. The phantom dreams—*spirits?*—of the night before had never revealed any of his sister's future; he had no idea what he ought to do. He only knew he must lead with his heart.

"Happy Christmas, my dear sister," he said, as soon as she reached him.

"It is not yet Christmas Day," she said, plainly puzzled by his mood.

"It is not so much the day, as the reason for it," he replied, handing her the jewellery box containing their mother's precious pearls. "A present for you, dearest." He had destroyed the note written the day before, exchanging it for another saying only 'I know our mother loved you, and would have been honoured to see you wear these. You are a credit to us both.'

She took the box, read the note with tear-filled eyes, viewed the pearls with admiration, and clutched them to her, thanking him profusely. Yet, her attitude of perplexity clearly remained. "What is this I hear about a journey to Hertfordshire?" she asked quietly, once they sat alone together in the gold parlour.

He did not answer her immediately, peering around at the formality and fineness of the room. The cushions were stiff and uncomfortable; one did not dare slouch. It reminded him of the gold salon at Pemberley. "You know, I feel we should redecorate this parlour. Something brighter, more welcoming. I think yellow instead of gold, with simpler, more comfortable furnishings."

His sister shook her head, and finally, after days of hardly speaking at all, expressed her bewilderment. "I have never seen you in such a state, Brother. Alice and Pennywithers are in a packing frenzy. Not only are you more cheerful than I have ever before noted, but you have been distributing guineas as if they were roasted chestnuts! And now, you talk of redecorating?" She coloured at her own words, plainly regretting her candour. "I beg your pardon. It is only I have never seen you take an interest in furnishings, and though you have always been generous...much more quietly so."

He smiled. "What your brother has been is a great fool, and he

wishes, very much, to attempt to undo some of the tangle he has made of his life while staying at Bingley's leased estate, Netherfield Park."

Her brows rose. "I cannot believe you were ever foolish in your life, even when a child."

"I am certain I had a good deal more sense as a child than I have demonstrated in recent years. The realisation has made me reconsider many things, and hence I have asked for a good deal of extra effort from many, at a time when I usually ask little. Thus, a few extra coins," he replied, shrugging.

"Much more than a few. And I have always thought you the epitome of what every gentleman should be," she protested loyally.

He gazed at her fondly. "Were you under the mistaken impression that I am a perfect being, destined for sainthood? Perhaps I do have a short way to go before being canonised." He laughed, while her expression grew ever more baffled at this teasing. He never teased. He was resolved to tease her at least once per day until she could match Miss Elizabeth for insouciance, but, taking pity on her apparent alarm, he clasped her hand in his.

"I do need to go, dearest, and at once. I would not like to leave you in London, and I sincerely hope you will accompany me, but I must warn you—George Wickham is in Meryton, the area to which I travel."

"Oh no!" she whispered, paling.

"Oh yes. You will not see him, not if I can prevent it. But go, I must, even so. Can you be brave and come with me? Please?"



* * *

Thus it was that Georgiana Darcy found herself heading out on a cold winter's day towards the location of the one man on earth whom she had hoped to never see nor hear of again. Her brother's mood was both confounding and disconcerting, but she could not leave him to do alone whatever it was that he felt must be done—

he had never before begged for her company.

After he had secured her agreement, he had gone to Mr Hurst's town house to speak to Mr Bingley; whatever he had said there had caused *that* gentleman so much agitation that he could not even bring himself to ride in their carriage, despite the frigid temperatures.

"I do hope the weather will not worsen," she said quietly, as she lost sight of Mr Bingley's figure on horseback. "I would not like him to take a chill."

"Mr Bingley's hopes are high enough to thaw him through a snowstorm," her brother replied, unconcerned. "If only I were as certain of a warm reception."

She finally noticed it then—beneath his unusually cheerful exterior, a very real discomposure of spirits, and she brought herself to question him.

"Will you tell me what troubles you, Fitzwilliam? What... foolishness you spoke of, that you feel you must put right?"

It was usual for him to discount such enquiries—and she could certainly not think of a time when he had ever confided any troubles to *her*. She could barely believe she had summoned the temerity to ask. But to her surprise, he regarded her seriously.

"My natural inclination is to be a selfish man," he said, forestalling her protest with a quickly raised hand. "I have been in the habit of caring little for any beyond my own acquaintance, frequently devaluing the sense and worth of others. That habit did not change, even when I met someone...extraordinary. Someone whose family circumstances are not as comfortable as ours, yet who looks at life with superior sense, humour, and liveliness. It did not change, although she is everything I could want in my life's companion—everything I could want for you, in a sister."

"You are in *love*?" she asked, astonished.

"I am, I trust," he replied seriously. "However, I have not behaved as a man in love ought."

"I will not believe it possible that you could act wrongly. I cannot fathom it."

He patted her hand. "I appreciate your loyalty, dear sister. But no, I tell you truly. I informed you that Wickham is there—stationed with his regiment in Meryton, the nearest village to Netherfield. As you can imagine, there is no good feeling between us, and he has set out to do what damage he can to my reputation.

What lies, specifically, he has spread about me, I know not, but that he *has* spoken them is certain. Of course, I would never expose you by revealing his unworthy behaviour towards you, but I also thought it beneath me to confront *anything* he said. What is more, he has made himself a friend to my...my beloved and her family, while I have never bothered to try to establish a connexion of any kind. I left the county without warning her father of the shades in Wickham's character. Mr Bennet has five daughters, without any fortune to tempt an honourable proposal from the reprobate. I mean to correct his standing with them, at least."

Georgiana sat transfixed with amazement at this confession. She could not, however, blame Fitzwilliam for ignoring George, even in the face of attempts to besmirch his honour. "It is understandable that you should refuse to speak of such a villain."

"Not when others could be hurt by my silence."

"That is all you mean to do? Warn them? Will you not court the lady?" she dared ask him.

"I cannot, not yet, I fear," he replied soberly. "I am afraid that I have given no good impression of my own character. For now, I will inform Mr Bennet of the snake in the grass—without involving your name, I promise. Mr Bingley is determined to ask for the hand of his eldest daughter, Miss Jane Bennet. It is to be hoped that I will have opportunities in the future to lessen her sister's ill opinion of me and show, by every civility in my power, that I understand how to please a woman worthy of being pleased."

He smiled at her then, with a full and genuine affection, losing the furrow between his brows. "I hope that I can overcome the worst of my mistakes. But even if I have ruined my chances, I can see my course. She shall never be left in doubt of my friendship." He reached across again to clasp her hands. "Do you not see, my sweet sister? Today is a new day. All of the preceding ones are forever in the past, and our mistakes are gone with them. We shall make others, of course, but upon every awakening to a new sunrise, we gain a new opportunity. Another chance to change, to grow, to learn, even if only a tiny bit. To make things better for those around us, even if we cannot make things better, quite yet, for ourselves."

"My past mistakes are heavy indeed," she said, biting her lip.

He shook his head. "I disagree, most emphatically, but what I think does not matter. If you wish to give that churl more of your attention, more of your sorrow, and more of your precious heart, I

cannot stop you. I will only pray that, in time, you will learn to look upon the past only as it gives you pleasure to do so, coming to see yourself as I see you: lovely, intelligent, good-humoured Georgiana Darcy, who has entirely too much sense to squander another moment on regrets.”

And then he winked at her. Winked!



* * *

They barely stayed at Netherfield long enough to change their travel clothing. Mr Bingley, who had, of course, arrived first, was beyond anxious to present himself at Longbourn.

One of the morning’s earliest couriers had fortunately been sent to Netherfield’s housekeeper, Mrs Nicholls, who had everything in readiness. Thanks to Darcy’s largesse, it was also an extremely merry household, offering many expressions of gratitude—all of which were waved off by the giver.

Once arrived at Longbourn and introductions completed, the small group was greeted enthusiastically by the mother, loudly by the two youngest, decorously by the three eldest, and acerbically by the father.

His newfound humility rendered the rather overwhelmingly jubilant greetings from Mrs Bennet easily borne. She was Elizabeth’s mother, and deserving of his best behaviour. Somewhat more difficult to bear was her habit of spilling out everything inside her head for the edification of her listeners.

“It is a long time, Mr Bingley, since you went away,” she cried. “I began to be afraid you would never come back again. Miss Bingley did say you meant to quit the place entirely, but I was certain she must be mistaken, for you agreed to come for dinner, and you would not forget. You remember, of course, Miss Bennet. I am sure you see how little altered she is since you were last here—her complexion so brilliant, her eyes so extraordinary.”

This time, however, Darcy caught how Miss Bennet, her cheeks

pinkening, immediately retreated into herself.

How stupid I have been! he thought. *She does not dare show any affectionate display, for fear of worsening her mother's enthusiastic outpourings.*

"I do not think there is a prettier girl in the country, though I *am* her mother!" Mrs Bennet continued. "I see the flaws in my daughters for what they are. Lizzy's nose wants character, and her teeth are nothing out of the common way, as I am certain you have noticed. Whereas Jane—"

But that his beloved should be publicly criticised was not to be tolerated from anyone, parent or not. Despite his embarrassment and what would doubtless be hers, his tongue could not be restrained. "For my own part, it is many weeks since I have considered Miss Elizabeth as unequalled, in appearance or deportment, by any lady of my acquaintance."

The room fell utterly silent. He glanced at Elizabeth who looked...flabbergasted. But the high spirits of Lydia Bennet came into usefulness as she giggled. "Next, Mama, you will be telling us that she is no better than Mary King, that nasty little freckled thing. Have you heard? She is gone down to her uncle in Liverpool!"

The whereabouts of Mary King was of great interest to Mrs Bennet and the next-youngest sister, while another Bennet sister—Mary, he thought—berated Miss Lydia for coarseness of expression. Amid the rather exuberant effusions that followed, he noticed Mr Bennet did nothing to rein in his progeny, never mind his wife.

Darcy could not look at Elizabeth beyond the briefest of glances, however, for fear of what would be in his face—and on hers. His feelings were a maelstrom of emotion—vast relief, that his mistakes concerning her would not be permanent, followed by a deep sense of grief and guilt that he had not behaved as the man he knew he should have been, perhaps destroying forever any chance for atonement.

And joy, oh yes, that too. Joyfully admitting his love for her, if only to himself, had given him a clarity like naught else. He could not expect anything except contempt from her as yet—he *deserved* nothing better. But all future decisions were to be based upon a fundamental principle: What was best for Elizabeth? Which made his next actions simple, if not easy.

"Excuse me, sir. I wonder whether I might have a private word with you?"

Mr Bennet agreed, but they were barely behind the closed door of his book room before he manifested his negative assumptions.

“What is this, Mr Darcy? Having been unable to prevent your friend from exercising discretion, did you tag along to warn me of how censured, slighted, and despised my eldest daughter will be by everyone connected with him if I wilfully act against your inclinations?”

My reputation is even worse than I believed! Darcy thought with astonishment. It had been, perhaps, ill-mannered of Bennet to say it, but if this was the contempt in which he was held, he could hardly blame the man. It was more important than ever to inform him of the true source of danger.

“I assure you, sir, if Mr Bingley is able to win your daughter’s regard, he will be the most fortunate of men. It is upon a different matter I must needs beg your attention.”

Huffing, Mr Bennet waved him into the chair opposite his own desk. Unsurprisingly, he was not offered any refreshment.

“My attention is now yours,” Bennet said formally, with no sign that his approval of Bingley’s suit had any effect. “Pray tell me what so urgently requires it.”

Darcy took a deep breath and began. “I am aware of rumours regarding my having injured Mr Wickham. I can only refute them by laying before you the whole of his connexion with my family. Of what he has particularly accused me, I am ignorant, but of the truth of what I shall relate, I can summon more than one witness of undoubted veracity.” He then proceeded to explain such particulars of his father’s bequest, Wickham’s rejection of it, his subsequent payment for it, and Wickham’s indignation when the living was thereafter refused his possession. Of course, he could not explain the revenge Wickham had attempted or the sorrow of his sister, and unfortunately, Mr Bennet felt no particular respect for his word.

“This appears to be a case of misunderstanding,” Bennet proclaimed, plainly unwilling to give Darcy the benefit of any doubt.

“Was it misunderstanding when he took the money my father provided for him to further his education and spent it on wine and wenching? When he has left a trail of fatherless children in his wake, whether or not their mothers were willing? Ask your neighbours to whom he owes his markers! They will never see a penny returned.”

“What is this? Surely not!”

Though he avoided bringing his sister’s name into his earnest explanations, he related many other particulars. When he reached the end of such revelations as he could admit, Darcy scrubbed his hands through his hair, forcibly calming himself. “Mr Bennet, I can assist any who are hurt financially by him, but we both know there are injuries which can never be recompensed. I promise you, he is most capable of inflicting these wrongs. I apologise for bringing you such a sorry report during the Festive Season.”

Mr Bennet only nodded. Darcy paused, and then, to that gentleman’s great astonishment, confessed his hope of courting Miss Elizabeth. The notion had preoccupied him since his arrival. He had not lied to Georgiana; as things stood, it would be foolish to pursue Elizabeth, and much smarter to wait and hope time would reveal to her his true character. Yet, when he had seen her for the first time that morning, his heart had leapt within his chest, and he knew that given any opportunity, his feelings were unlikely to be repressed. It was only proper that he warn her father and beg his permission, if not his approval.

Of course, Mr Bennet was surprised and not overjoyed to hear of it. “I suppose I must give you my consent. You are the kind of man, indeed, to whom I should never dare refuse anything which you condescend to ask. But I warn you now, I shall advise her to think carefully on it. I know her disposition. I know that she could be neither happy nor respectable unless she truly esteems her husband. Riches can never compensate for misery.”

It was a blow. Darcy absorbed it.

“I promise, sir, that unless I am certain she *could* care for me, I will not ask her to.” He stood, offering a bow, and Bennet rose and returned the acknowledgement.

“Thank you, Mr Darcy,” he said solemnly, his face expressionless.

Darcy departed with no idea whether Bennet would believe or discount his honest reports, or whether his reputation remained compromised. *Have these confessions been enough? What more could I have said? Or did I say too much?*



* * *

Georgiana had been the only one of the party not particularly eager to visit the bastion of the Bennets. She knew that Fitzwilliam would not require it of her, yet she was curious to see the woman ‘worthy of being pleased’. His words—*‘every awakening to a new sunrise, we gain a new opportunity’*—struck her again. She was certain that as of yesterday, he had still been disappointed in her. And yet, his note of this morning had been charity itself. Had their aunt’s sudden death caused his sudden change of heart?

Longbourn was a pretty property, nicely situated, and while not at all modern, like Rosings Park or even Netherfield, it wore its age well. Mr Bingley’s love for the golden-haired Miss Bennet was soon apparent, but it was no less obvious than Mrs Bennet’s rather overwhelming admiration for him. Her brother somehow contrived to go away with Mr Bennet into the latter’s book room, and Georgiana, feeling very bashful and out of place, tried to make herself as unnoticeable as possible. But she was not long left to her own devices.

“I have heard much of your talent at the pianoforte from Miss Bingley,” Miss Elizabeth said, sitting beside her and smiling in a friendly manner.

Georgiana immediately coloured, for Miss Bingley could be so complimentary as to create an excessive expectation in any listeners who heard her fervour. “I am, um, perhaps, not so proficient as she, um, may have implied.”

Miss Elizabeth grinned. “Oh, I am certain no one could be. You might be a prodigy and still not be as nimble-fingered as Miss Bingley claims. Nevertheless, I would be delighted to hear you play.”

Georgiana could not resist Miss Elizabeth’s smile, nor the relief she felt when they went together into another, much smaller parlour that held the instrument. It was quieter, and distanced from the gathered, more enthusiastic company in the larger drawing

room.

“We keep the pianoforte in here so that my sister Mary may practise undisturbed,” she explained, still smiling.

Georgiana found this a bit unusual. How could Mary entertain her family and guests with the instrument so far from any company? Nevertheless, she played a short piece for which she needed no music, and her audience of one was kindly complimentary, even asking her a question regarding a difficult passage and saying she had attempted it previously without success. Together they worked on it as a duet, and Georgiana almost forgot to be shy as Miss Elizabeth triumphantly declared a victory when they mastered it.

When Fitzwilliam had declared her ‘unequalled, in appearance or deportment, by any lady of his acquaintance’, she had been certain that Elizabeth *must* be the woman whom her brother admired, and whom he believed he had failed. In the moment he said it, Georgiana had been somewhat surprised. While Miss Elizabeth was pretty, she was not classically so, and not even so much as her sisters. Her mouth was wide rather than rosebud, her chin a bit sharp, her eyes large in her face, and her hair dark rather than golden. But now, after perhaps half an hour in her company, Georgiana was beginning to understand why he found her so pleasing.

Her smile was warm and genuine; she had immediately perceived Georgiana’s shyness and set out to make her comfortable. Those large eyes sparkled with intelligence and good humour. It was so easy to be with her, even when easiness was not a talent one possessed!

I love my brother. He loves her. She is vulnerable to Wickham’s lies, as was I. What is my pride in comparison?

“Miss Elizabeth,” she began, unable to prevent the rather desperate pitch to her voice, “I saw there seemed to be a prettyish kind of a little wilderness on one side of your lawn. I know it is cold out, and I do apologise, but...I should be glad to take a turn in it, if you will favour me with your company?”



* * *

Darcy emerged from the prolonged and difficult conversation with Mr Bennet feeling very subdued. It was such a shock, learning just how severely damaged his reputation in this community was, although he *should* have known it. *Could* have known it, had he bothered to pay attention. Worst of all, he was not completely certain he had been believed, although he had relayed numerous details—many humiliatingly personal—of Wickham’s cruelties and viciousness, and even after giving Bennet the direction of his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, so that he might have a witness of unarguable reputation with whom to verify Darcy’s words.

At that moment, and to his surprise, his sister and Elizabeth entered the house from the large vestibule opposite him, obviously having just come in from the out of doors—their noses red and a footman collecting their wraps. Startled, he looked from one to the other. Georgiana smiled at him, fully, for the first time in recent memory. And Elizabeth...Elizabeth looked at him with such compassion, such kindness in her lovely eyes, that he immediately knew his sister’s secrets were revealed. He did not know what to say or how to act.

But Elizabeth did. “I do hope you all will stay to dinner. Mama sets a fine table, which has been elevated to *extraordinary* in honour of Christmas Eve.”

Darcy felt his own smile spreading across his face, suffusing his soul. “We accept your invitation, and with the deepest appreciation.” He bowed. It was all he could do not to throw himself at her feet.



*All days are nights to see till I see thee
And nights bright days when dreams do show me thee.*

Shakespeare, Sonnet 43

December 24, 1811

Lizzy hardly knew how to feel. Had anyone asked her yesterday whether she would enjoy sharing a meal with Mr Bingley's solemn houseguest, she would have laughed! Had she not giggled with Charlotte, titling him the 'Disapproving Detractor from Derbyshire'? Had she not lumped him in with Miss Bingley after that lady's horrid letter to Jane, wherein she blamed *him* for their sudden

departure from Netherfield? Yet here he was at their noisy, merry dinner, receiving occasional sidelong glances from Mrs Bennet—who was, thankfully, just a bit too obsessed with poor Jane and Bingley to voice even an eighth of her hopefulness in his direction.

His sister—deemed ‘proud’ by that horrid Lieutenant Wickham—was touchingly sweet and terribly shy. Even now, she looked a bit overwhelmed as Kitty and Lydia peppered her with questions regarding her dressmaker, the latest London entertainments, and her opinions on gothic novels, hardly allowing her time to answer before they offered their own. Why had she chosen to reveal such secrets as she possessed to Lizzy?

Why had Mr Darcy declared her ‘unequalled’ before her entire family? Most likely, he thought her mother’s open criticism coarse, and meant it as a kindly correction.

He could not have meant it in any other way! Had he not looked upon her, indeed all her family, with the most fervent disapproval? Did he not hate her? It seemed far too great of an about-turn to think of him as...as a *suitor*!

And yet, how differently did everything now appear in which he was concerned! Poor Miss Darcy, to have been subjected to such villainous treatment! Poor Mr Darcy, distraught as any caring brother and guardian would be, only to be further exposed to slander and disparagement by that same scoundrel!

Her father, who customarily used every opportunity to practise his wit upon visitors, had been silent and rather morose throughout the meal. Hopefully, he was now reconsidering his lackadaisical permissiveness towards her youngest sisters, and all suggestions pertaining to following the regiment once they departed the area would be vetoed.

After the ladies excused themselves from the dinner table, the gentlemen rejoined them in a gratifyingly short time. Elizabeth could not keep her gaze from drifting towards Mr Darcy, but he made no move to take a place beside her. Not that it would be easily done—in her mother’s efforts to position Jane and Mr Bingley to her liking, she had stuffed Lizzy well-nigh into a corner between Kitty and Mary. Mr Darcy hovered protectively near his sister, saying little. Still, he returned her look once or twice, just often enough that she thought he *might* wish to at least exchange a word or two. Every time that she made an attempt to rearrange her own seating, however, her mother spoilt her plans, having her refill her

cup, or her father's, or entreat Mrs Hill to bring more biscuits—was she purposely keeping her apart from him? Then she laughed at herself. Her mother would never consciously separate her from such an eligible male, even if she hated him. As she had already proven.

A wave of frustration followed. Why was it so difficult to learn what was in a man's heart? Of course, it had been simplicity itself to know Mr Collins; he wore his essence in plain sight, never disguising his avarice or his sense of self-importance. But she had been completely deceived by Lieutenant Wickham's false charms; why should she believe she had any insight whatsoever into the males of the species?

I cannot trust my own judgment. By leaving the room to speak to Mrs Hill, however, she had changed her position within it. Before she knew it, Mr Darcy stood directly before her.

"There is an evening service tonight, is there not? We would be pleased to drive you, if you care to attend."

Lizzy, her head just then full of puzzled musings on the nature of men, answered without thinking. "Oh, we have the sledge take us, two or three at a time—it is a family tradition, and not at all an efficient mode of travel."

"It sounds perfectly wonderful," he said—a little wistfully, she thought.

"Do you think so?" she asked, genuinely curious.



* * *

Thus it was that Lizzy found herself driving with Fitzwilliam Darcy, once considered the most staid and serious of gentlemen, in Longbourn's cutter-style sleigh to the Christmas Eve service, squeezed between him and Georgiana, with the siblings' delighted laughter ringing in the air as he—perhaps flaunting his excellent hand at the reins, just a bit—whisked them to the little church in Meryton.

It so happened that the evening featured a Christmas pageant

performed by the village schoolchildren. Lizzy was filled with compassion for the harried schoolmistress when the goat escaped the stable yard scene, only to begin chewing on the particularly delicious wing of an angel—causing said angel to burst into tears until the angel’s brother drove the goat away. The three kings in moth-eaten robes presented their gifts to a fretting infant, who, not caring particularly for frankincense and myrrh during what was doubtless his mealtime, set up a hue and cry fit to shout down a noticeably unconfident young narrator. Lizzy thought, perhaps, that the casting might have gone amiss, for mother Mary—the elder sister of said babe—could not have been more than nine years at most, and was completely unequal to the task of shushing him.

It appeared that his cries might bring the performance to an early finish. However, in a quick act of costuming, Lizzy flung her shawl over her head and joined the performers as a new character in the Holy Family: the baby Jesus’s nurserymaid. Swiftly, she quieted the poor child, much to the relief of all.

Afterwards, however, Lizzy was feeling just a touch wary about the pageant’s flaws and slightly self-conscious about her own participation in them, wondering whether the grand gentleman from London was in a mood to be critical. She waited until Sir William was finished bending his ear—although Mr Darcy asked after the health of Mr and Mrs Collins most politely, she thought, and appeared pleased enough to hear his positive reports—before broaching the topic.

“It does not feel like Christmas until the children portray the nativity,” she explained, looking up at him to see his response while the teacher herded her noisy flocks towards the atrium where punch was being served, their parents trailing behind them. “And it is good to behave as children sometimes, and never better than at Christmas, when its mighty Founder was a child Himself.”

But to her near surprise, Mr Darcy had nothing but praise for the entire entertainment and even her little part in salvaging it. “It has been the most wonderful performance I have ever seen,” he declared with some strange emotion, taking her gloved hand within his own. “If I had my wish, I would come to this little church every Christmas Eve for the rest of my life, simply for the possibility of capturing its magic once again.”

Which was the moment, of course, in which she began to fall in love. *Oh Lizzy, you do know how to pick them! If George Wickham was*

beneath you, this man is so far beyond your reach, you may as well ask for the moon!

"You are laughing at me," she quietly accused, unable to believe he would not be. Her eyes widened when she realised that they were, at least briefly, alone in the nave.

He glanced about the empty sanctuary, then regarded her earnestly. "May I drive you back?" he asked. "I begged Bingley to see that my sister and yours all reached home safely. I received your father's permission to ask to see you home to Longbourn after the service." He smiled somewhat ruefully. "He said that he dared not refuse me, but he hoped that you might."

"You did? He did?" She felt her heart beginning to hammer and, in a sudden wave of embarrassment, looked at her feet. But she did not pull her hand away.

"I did," he said softly. "You must know...you *have* to know how ardently I admire you."

In her astonishment at this bold declaration, her gaze swiftly rose to meet his. "I had not the smallest idea, sir, I promise you. Until this precise moment, if anyone had told me you did, why... why, I would believe they were dreaming! And if I repeated such an idea to my neighbours, they would believe *I* was!"

For some peculiar reason, this sentiment made him laugh, its echoes sounding to the rafters. Lizzy could not help but notice he appeared particularly handsome when he was thus engaged, and then he grinned at her with what could only be called mischievousness.

"Come," he said coaxingly, turning towards the great double doors opening onto the street, urging her out into the frigid night. There were plenty of people about, laughing and talking. In fact, Mr Bingley was there with Jane, Georgiana, and Mary, near his vehicle across the lane, while her father had bestirred himself to come in the family carriage and was herding Mrs Bennet, Lydia, and Kitty into it. Lizzy also saw a good deal of interest from both family and villagers when they emerged together. The youth who Mr Darcy paid—quite handsomely, she had noted—to attend to their horse and sledge during the service was awaiting them only yards away.

Lizzy allowed him to tug her out of the church doorway, confused by his mood and his confessions. "Mr Darcy, everyone is watching! It will be thought you are—" Abruptly she broke off, for it felt foolhardy to say it aloud, despite his admission of admiration.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said, using a distinctly formal, stentorian voice that was probably loud enough to draw the attention of the entire village, “I beg you to grant me the favour of your escort to Longbourn.”

She looked up at him with some chagrin, cheeks flushed and not with the cold, quickly dropping his hand. “I did not mean to imply that you ought to be making public any declarations.”

“It is my dearest wish to do so,” he replied promptly, even eagerly. “And your slightest preference, henceforth, shall be my command. If ever there is anything I might do to increase your happiness, you must only say so. Anything at all.” He straightened, his expression growing more sombre. “Even if it is your wish that I remove myself altogether. If I have importuned or embarrassed you in any way, I apologise.”

Could it be that he was...unsure of himself? Or at least, of how his suit might be received? As incredible as it seemed, she could not keep from smiling, remembering her own earlier self-admonitions. “I must confess myself surprised by your application—I did not expect it from you. It is even dangerous of you, perhaps, for you have no idea what my happiness requires. I wonder what you would say, for instance, if only this evening I admitted that I was longing for the moon?”

A long wooden crook, probably discarded by one of the young shepherds, stood leaning against the nearby church’s sandstone wall. Mr Darcy plucked it up and pointed the hook’s end skyward. “Naturally, then, I should capture it with my trusty staff and pull it down as a small gift for your pleasure and diversion. If the moon would be yours, my lady, you have but to ask,” he said with a bow, wielding the crook with a flourish.

“I will take it,” she replied, wondering at this new side to Mr Darcy, so opposite of the taciturn, critical being she had imagined him to be. Laughter bubbled within her. The surrounding snow brilliantly reflected the moonlight, and she tilted her face up to bathe in its glow. Turning back to him, she suddenly felt as powerful as Diana or Artemis or whichever goddess ruled the night sky. “And then what?”

“Why, I would melt it for you into a rich cordial for your evening dessert—it is astounding, I assure you, the difference a bit of moon makes for flavouring—and serve it any time you like. And of course, then, whenever you wish, moonbeams would surge from

the tips of your fingers and your toes and the ends of your hair, and the world will not be able to take their eyes from you, or your beautiful moon-spun—”

“The world, in general, will have too much sense to join in. In my day, one simply asked the girl to marry him, instead of talking her to death.”

They both whirled sharply in the direction of the speaker. Mr Bennet stood there, his most sardonic expression in full force.

“Papa!” Elizabeth cried, embarrassed.

Instead of responding to her father, however, Mr Darcy knelt before her in the dirty, slushy snow, not even appearing to notice or care for the ruination of his trousers. “Miss Elizabeth,” he said, softly this time, and she knew he did not speak for the benefit of her father or the neighbourhood or anyone else except herself, “I realise I have not given you time to be certain of my character, or to show it to be a better one than you have any means of believing. If you will grant me the privilege of courting you, I promise to spend every day of the rest of my life attempting to prove myself worthy.”

“Bah, more words. Youth is wasted on the young.” Lizzy heard her father’s sigh of impatience as he turned on his heel, but if Mr Darcy could so easily disregard him, she found she could as well. She held out her hands, and he searched her expression before he took them, rising up to look down upon her. The whole of *her* world watched, she knew, but she could not care, and plainly, neither did he.

“Be careful, Mr Darcy. You have promised me the moon, and now, your devotion. How you will outdo yourself tomorrow is quite beyond me.”

He grinned, his dimple showing. But his expression intensified and sobered as his slitted gaze dropped to her lips; he appeared almost unbearably handsome in the moonlight. His voice, when he finally spoke, was deep and low. “Ah, but I have not yet kissed you, you see. There are many delightful surprises in store, I promise, if you will but agree to my suit.”

A thrilling, near-giddy sensation overcame her at both his words and expression. “It is fortunate,” said she, smiling up at him, “that I shall have *something* left to wish for. And perhaps you might have a dream or two yourself, I hope, that I can make come true as well?”

“Almost, I cannot breathe for hoping it,” he murmured.

But the silent onlookers, plainly unable to ascertain any more of their conversation, were silent no longer. "What did she say?" called a jubilant-sounding Mr Bingley from across the lane.

"Yes, yes, what was her answer?" repeated many voices, Mrs Bennet's being one of the noisiest.

Mr Darcy turned to the expectant crowd. "Happy Christmas, Bingley! Happy Christmas, Georgiana! Happy Christmas, Bennet Family! Happy Christmas, Meryton! Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!" Both waving merrily, they quickly boarded the sledge and were soon lost to the sight of the questioning crowd.

Mr Darcy, it turned out, possessed another talent besides moon-capture and court-shipping—he could drive their cutter holding the reins in one hand whilst keeping one arm about her. She was dressed quite warmly—they both were—and there were woollen blankets besides, but still she snuggled in beside him so closely she could hear the steady beat of his heart. The bells of the harness tinkled in appreciative accompaniment.

He smiled down upon her, taking her breath away, and she found that, though in the certain possession of his warmest affection, and secure of her relations' consent, there was still something to be wished for. "I am afraid you heard only the smallest part of my mother's enthusiasm. You may want to stay at Netherfield until she has calmed, lest she insist upon you procuring a licence and at once."

"Rather, I shall encourage her and her effusions most warmly, to counter your father's disapproval."

Elizabeth hastened to explain. "He does not truly disapprove, you know. It is only he has little patience for romantic sentiment. I remember once explaining to him that certain harness bells held echoes of angel-song, and we could only hear them when an angel was released from a long sorrow. I do not even know why I thought it so, but it frustrated him endlessly when I could not be talked out of my childish belief. I do not think angels can *have* sorrows, do you?" She smiled at the memory, and he squeezed her affectionately.

"Why not? Does not Scripture say there 'must needs be an opposition in all things'? It is only great love that can instigate great grief. And I do not see why there must be an end, even in death, to any love so profound."

Lizzy looked up at him in some surprise. "You are a philosopher,

sir! You shall never fear my father's wit. I daresay he will enjoy sparring with you. And...may I say how very happy I am that we are on the same side of this debate?" It was astounding, really, how comfortable she felt in expressing such feelings to a man who had seemed a distant, censorious stranger so short a time past. It also felt safe to confess flaws another man might never have overlooked.

"I ought never to have believed Lieutenant Wickham's claims," she admitted. "I cannot imagine why I was so easily misled. I apologise to you, most sincerely, for believing as I believed, and especially for repeating his words. Since speaking with your sister, I have reflected upon how little good reason I had for trusting his version of events so easily."

His arm tightened around her again. "I pray you forget it all," he said. "My own father believed in him, and even left him a legacy in his will, desiring that a certain living be given to him, once it was vacated."

"You mean, in the church?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded. "I knew it to be a mistake, and I thought he did as well, so with his agreement, I compensated him for it rather than grant the bequest. Of course, later he expected to receive it, regardless."

"Your sister explained that you had paid him quite handsomely for a legacy, but that he coveted her fortune as well. She said that he hates you and that he did everything in his power to turn her against you, telling her the most vicious lies. And also, that she is mortified every time she remembers how you felt obligated to prove to her, with signed documents, the dishonesty of his allegations. She cannot think how to make it up to you."

"There is nothing to atone for. She was but fifteen at the time and knew him only as a young child, which must be her excuse. She came to me, you know, when I visited her a day or two before the planned elopement, and confessed it all. She could never abide grieving or offending me, no matter what he said. I am proud of her, but I can see I must tell her so more often."

Lizzy smiled up at him. "She only wants a little more liveliness, and *that*—since you plan, I hope, to provide her a sister who is perhaps a bit spirited—your wife might teach her."

He smiled back so broadly that the whiteness of his teeth gleamed in the moonlight, and he tightened his arm about her again.

They drove through the dim snowy lanes, the winter moon as bright as any torch-glow—although the mare knew the way well enough to find her stable, even had the night been darker. This journey, unlike the one accomplished earlier in the company of Miss Darcy, was taken slowly, as they both revelled, she thought, in the newness of their connexion and the miracle of its discovery. In contrast to his earlier speeches, he was quiet as he brought the vehicle to a halt just before the lane leading up the hill to Longbourn.

“It occurs to me,” he said, looking down at her with all seriousness, “that there is one thing I neglected to mention, above everything else—I do love you, you see. I ought to have begun with that.”

“I was beginning to suspect something of the sort,” she said impishly, arrested by his gaze.

He put both arms around her, not in an embrace, exactly, but more as if he could hardly believe it possible that he held her so near, and must touch her to confirm its reality. “I remember what you said, you know—of the efficacy of poetry in driving love away. If I am too mawkish, you must remind me. I fear I lose all sense with you beside me, battling the sonnets that do so constantly beset me whilst in your presence.”

“We both have reason to think my opinions on romance not entirely unalterable. I only just confessed to imagining I have heard the sounds of angels.”

He took her face within his gloved fingers. “I hope you never stop believing in angels or in romance. I will do everything I can to nourish your dreams and nurture passion between us. Not simply this night, but every future day, and all the nights to come. I hope you will allow me to recite you sonnets when our hair is silver and my eyesight dim. I promise, however, that I do know better than to compose any verses myself.” Looking deeply into her eyes, he quoted:

*“When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess’d,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,*

*With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings."*

Lizzy placed her hands over his own. "Oh! Not mawkish in the slightest! My feelings are now so widely different from what they once were. Promise me you will quote Shakespeare's sonnets whenever we are private enough for you to accept the consequences." And with a bravery she never could have fathomed just an hour before, she moved to touch her lips to his, expressing herself as sensibly and warmly as only a woman newly in love could be supposed to do.

"My dearest heart," he said, once he could speak again—which was not for some moments. "My only love." A snowflake drifted down and landed on his nose; she kissed it.

"Your nose is cold," she whispered.

He touched his forehead to hers. "Let us return to the warmth of Longbourn's fire, where we may plan the start of the rest of our lives together," he replied softly. After tucking the blanket more snugly around her, he took up the reins once more. And as he did so, a bell pealed, the reverberation more pure and sweet than any harness's jangling.

"Did you hear that chime?" she said. "That was it! The sound I once called angel-song! I have not heard it in ever so long, and I have not an idea from whence it originates. Some peculiar echo, I suppose."

"I did hear," he said confidently, urging the mare forward with an expert flick of the reins. "It is my opinion that it is the sound of an angel released from a long-held sorrow. In fact, I am absolutely certain of it."

She stretched up to place a kiss upon his cheek before snuggling back down once more into the shelter of his embrace. "I like so well that you are a romantic, too," she said. "I never would have dreamt it."

Mr Darcy only smiled.

The End

(or, The Beginning, *depending upon how one looks at it*)



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About the Author

Julie Cooper, a California native, lives with her Mr Darcy (without the arrogance or the Pemberley) of nearly forty years, two dogs (one intelligent, one goofball), and Kevin the Cat (smarter than all of them.) They have four children and four grandchildren, all of whom are brilliant and adorable, and she has the pictures to prove it. She works as an executive at a gift basket company and her tombstone will read, 'Have your Christmas gifts delivered at least four days before the 25th.' Her hobbies include reading, giving other people good advice, and wondering why no one follows it.



Also by Julie Cooper

Nameless

“This was not a man who would explode in a rage, or who would give way to shame or temper...which meant my choices were simple: either he had killed her in cold blood, or he had not killed her at all.”

ORPHANED AND ALONE IN THE WORLD, Elizabeth Bennet has found reasonable contentment as a companion to the Dowager Countess of Matlock, the affairs of 1811 and Fitzwilliam Darcy long forgotten. But the past intrudes upon her again, and Mr Darcy returns to her, handsome, wealthy, and widowed, and hiding many secrets beneath his solemn exterior.

BUT IF TIME HAD ALTERED THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES, one thing remains:

Mr Darcy still wishes to marry her, and this time, Elizabeth consents. At nearly twenty-nine it is inarguably a good prospect for her and indeed, not until they arrive at his vast estate does she realise how large a shadow his late wife will cast over their growing love. But the new Mrs Darcy's courage will continue to rise despite the many attempts to intimidate her; and she vows to use whatever power she holds over the master of Pemberley to keep him.

NAMELESS is a tale of the triumph of good over evil, of passion over prejudice, of loyalty over lies...and most of all, of enduring, unfailing love. This Pride and Prejudice sequel is perfect for fans of Jane Austen as well as those who love gothic masterpieces like Jane Eyre and Daphne Du Maurier's Rebecca.

The Perfect Gentleman

Georgiana Darcy has gone missing. Lizzy Bennet knows just what to do to find her.

‘Tis no secret that Lizzy Bennet has dreams. The uniquely talented daughter of a woman with a dubious reputation, Lizzy knows she must make her own way in a world that shuns her.

Fitzwilliam Darcy carries the stains of his family's dishonour upon his soul and only by holding himself to the strictest standards has he reclaimed his place in society. If his fifteen-year-old sister cannot be found quickly, her scandal could destroy years of perfect behaviour. Lizzy is willing to join the

pursuit to get what she wants but will Darcy be willing to trust her with his secrets? And what will they do when the search for Georgiana reveals what neither expected to find?

This *Pride & Prejudice* variation is two stories in one book. Volume 1 starts in Ramsgate with the disappearance of Miss Darcy and follows the adventures of Elizabeth Bennet as she seeks to find her. In Volume 2, our favourite couple has recognised their feelings for one another but more surprises and challenges still await them at Pemberley.

[Tempt Me](#)

"He raged inwardly at fate's gift of the one female he could never, ever have..."

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single vampyre must be in want of a wife. Someone biddable, her memories easily expunged to allow for strange, inexplicable deeds and baffling circumstances. A tractable creature, of average intelligence, willing to attend to the business of producing heirs and keep out of all else. A girl easily moulded, incurious, indifferent, and demanding nothing beyond access to his fortune.

Fitzwilliam Darcy knows exactly who he needs. He can fix on the hour, the spot, the look, and the words which laid the foundation for an obsession he rejected. But ten years later, at an assembly in an obscure village in Hertfordshire, he finds himself in the middle once more.

His needs are unalterable. But can he resist the one woman he truly wants?

[Seek Me: Georgiana's Story](#)

...death cannot stop true love.

The happily-ever-after for the Vampyre world's most important couple goes on for centuries, but the daughter of Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth Darcy is seeking her own happiness. Dr Georgiana Darcy has spent two centuries pursuing a career dedicated to helping others, but has yet to find romantic love. That could change when the Darcys and their Vampyre family return to Pemberley for the first time since Georgiana was a young girl. Will history repeat itself, and another generation of Darcys fall in love with a mortal?

Seek Me is a companion novella to Julie Cooper's *Tempt Me* and tells the story of Dr Georgiana Darcy's quest for love.

[Lost and Found](#)

Sisters. Chaos at home. A father who isn't paying attention. A powerful hero, whose behaviour is anything but heroic. Sound familiar? Some of our

favourite characters from *Pride & Prejudice* star in this story set in Fairy Tale England, where enchantments—of the magical and of the heart—meet.

Once upon a time, there lived two sisters. Jane was fair, with mild blue eyes and hair the colour of corn silk. Elizabeth had long, dark, thick curls and eyes the startling green of a spring glade. Soon after the arrival of an evil stepmother, the girls found themselves starving and alone in the woods.

Their fairy tale ending is not easy to accomplish as one sister disappears into the home of a witch and the other sister—the valiant Elizabeth—is set to work as her slave. Wickedness is all around, and only by working with, and trusting, the cursed master of Pemberley can she break free of her captor, and release her sister and her beloved Darcy from the spells cast by the witch.